Ash and Youth Side by Side

Benny Matsuyama

Main Characters

Skalda Protagonist. A level 13 warrior who has just changed jobs to a priest. Good.

Jaime A member of the party. Was a thief, but became a ninja with a magic item. Neutral.

Gadi A level 13 warrior. Neutral.

Relar A level 13 priest. Good.

Salev A level 12 female mage. Neutral.

Silver A mage. Lost.

Xuchyst A mysterious mage. Evil.

Thelon The undead lord of the citadel city.

Werdna A great evil mage.

Prologue

It was a world of jet-black darkness.
Not a single shaft of light existed in that frozen underworld.
There, sealed within thick bedrock, *it* lay.

No—more precisely, it was not lying in a space.
It *was* the space, filling every corner that could have been called such.
As though the rock itself had been hollowed to its shape and set around it, seamless stone cut it off completely from the outer air, greatly slowing the pace of its decay.

Left to itself for countless ages, it should have eventually merged with the stone…

In the depths of darkness, a sinister vibration flowed.
A slow, periodic pulsing, like the stirring of some vast beast.
From where it was sent, no one could say, but the waves coursed through the bedrock and enveloped it.

Thump… thump… thump… thump…

For hours the vibration had continued, sometimes great, sometimes faint, as though its source wandered the depths of the earth in search of something.

Along with the waves came a faint chant—not in the Common Tongue of today, but in a groaning cadence, an ancient magical language known only to a handful of master magi.

The surging waves and the growl of the archaic tongue whispered at it—soothing, urging, beckoning.

In the blackness, it stirred.
Not enough to say it had moved, for the surrounding stone constrained it utterly.
But after lying motionless for years, it now shifted with clear intent.

“...Who... calls... me... to kill…? ...Whose voice…?”

As though answering its reviving memories, the chant rose higher, louder.

“Sleep… hatred… awaken… death… blood… ruin…

destruction…!”

Its consciousness grew sharper, more baleful.
The chant’s reverberations swelled until it seemed the heavens and the earth alike would be shaken.

“Who is it!?”

Its eyes flew open.

“Who dares to waken me!?”

It awakened. At that instant, its form vanished from within the stone.
The waves and chanting ebbed like a receding tide.

When silence returned to the underworld, only a human-shaped void remained in the rock.

“Source of life, flowing hot blood.
Blood that seeps within the body, crimson stream.
Water of life,
current of life—
May this current, halted in a body gone cold,
bear a soul once more.
Bear it once more.

The soul is eternal.
The spirit does not perish.
To the body where it belongs,
soul, return!

O God, who created our world,
ruler of all things,
we beseech Thee: call back this lost soul,
banish the darkness,
bring forth the light.

Grant life again to this cleansed flesh.
Relight the frozen blood with flame.
From ashes, restore this body to flesh and blood.

Kalki!
Kalki!
Cadolt!”

“____”

“...You botched it?”

The voice of a young man rang out, harsh with fury.

“Don’t tell me—you’re saying he’s lost!?”

“I did all that could be done… but it was in vain…”
The reply, weak and tinged with fear, belonged to an older man.

“Don’t give me that crap! After failing twice at a temple that specializes in resurrection, now you say you tried your best? We didn’t pay over ten thousand gold out of charity, you bastard! You’d better fix this—”

“Enough. A man’s life rests only in the will of God.”
A third voice cut across the young man’s rage. “If he is lost, then nothing more can be done.”

“But—!”
The young man’s fury trembled at the edge of restraint.

Someone departed in haste, the clatter of hobnailed boots striking stone floor echoing behind him. No doubt the one cornered by the young man had fled.

“Fraudulent priest,” the youth spat.
“Maybe it would’ve worked better if you’d just used your own damned spells.”

“That would have been the worst outcome of all.”
The man’s voice, deeper than the youth’s, was bitter.
“We have lost a friend worthy of respect—Silver. And with him, a wielder of powerful sorcery.”

“...”

The two fell silent.
Only the echo of prayers, rising from somewhere unseen, lingered on without end.

Act 1

Scene 1. Gilgamesh's Tavern

In the vast training grounds adjoining the castle of King Trebor—infamous as a violent ruler—yet another day saw a handful of drifters, nearly ten of them, step forward before dusk. They aimed to earn their place as royal guards by defeating the great sorcerer Werdna and securing a protective talisman—a wager bordering on sheer folly. Yet most within two or three days either fled with their tails between their legs or died outright. Thanks to this, the fortress city never truly suffered from being overrun by hordes of reckless adventurers.

Skallda left the class change dojo—a hall tucked into one corner of the training grounds—just as the day's final deadline approached, the sun sinking toward the horizon. This was where adventurers came to switch their professions, and if they had the strength, one of the eight masters of each class would bestow upon them the secrets of their craft in a short but grueling course.

By the time the sun had vanished completely beyond the mountains far to the west, Skallda was stepping through the castle gates. Two guards stood watch to prevent suspicious figures from entering, but both knew Skallda's face well by now, and let him pass with nothing more than a nod.

Until yesterday—or more accurately, until this very morning—Skallda had been one of the few warriors of this city to earn recognition as a seasoned veteran, a Level 13 fighter. A level was a measure of mastery within a given class, and at 13, both mages and priests were considered worthy of learning all their spells. It was a badge of ability, proof of power.

But now, Skallda had become a Level 1 samurai—untested in real battle. Only moments ago he had finished the harsh retraining at the dojo, drilling the foundations of the samurai's art into his body: disciplines of physical training a warrior rarely practiced, the philosophy unique to samurai combat, and even elementary studies that would one day allow him to wield wizardly spells. In a single day, a curriculum equivalent to five years of training had been crammed into his limbs and bones.

No wonders his body felt unfamiliar, leaden, as if his arms and legs were weighted with iron. His old instincts as a warrior seemed

dulled.

Within the castle walls, adventurers were free to roam everywhere but the central citadel itself. Skallda paused in the street and looked up at its spires, towering against the darkening sky. From countless windows, light blazed, betraying another noble banquet within.

The castle of kings, nobles, and the royal guard...

When he had first arrived here at sixteen, Skallda too had dreamed of rising to the guard, of entering that palace: the glittering ornaments, the sumptuous feasts, the beautiful ladies. Perhaps, he had thought, such a life could be won through perilous dungeon forays on the city's edge.

But after two years of battle upon battle, the lure of noble luxury seemed hollow.

What he craved above all was strength. The power to slay any monster. That determination alone had kept him alive when so many others fled. Thinking so, he resumed his steps across the dark cobblestones.

The walled district was not large; after only a few minutes' walk he reached the street where adventurers gathered—the thoroughfare of Gilgamesh's Tavern. Even at night it was more bustling than by day, crowded with taverns and gambling dens. Gilgamesh's itself never closed, drawing throngs of seekers in search of companions.

It was there, before the tavern door, that a man cooling himself with a wine cup spotted Skallda.
"Hey, Skallda!"

The man strode over. "Where've you been hiding?"
"Don't you notice?" Skallda replied.
"Notice? …Well, come to think of it, you do look older than yesterday. No way you're eighteen anymore!"

The man—Jaba, the party's thief and front-liner—tipped back his cup and rubbed his eyes in mock astonishment. Weak in strength but unrivaled in disarming traps, Jaba was notorious for his gaudy mannerisms, which many thought ill-suited to such delicate work.

"What happened—caught for some mischief and worked to the bone? Hard labor in the sun would age you quick!"
"That's a fine thing to say to your comrade. I've endured harsher

training than any labor camp could dish out." Skallda stroked the faint stubble on his chin and grimaced.
"What do you mean?"
"You're slow on the uptake. I was in the training grounds all day."
"…So you class-changed? No wonder you look five years older!" Jaba laughed, thumping Skallda's chest. "Keeping that a secret from me—bad form, friend."

At that moment a woman emerged from the tavern. Another comrade: Sara, a Level 12 mage on the verge of mastering her final spells.
"Jaba, still sobering up? …Oh, Skallda! Where've you been today, eh? Forced labor?"
"And what exactly do you take me for?" Skallda muttered, annoyed.
"Oh, someone worth teasing, of course. You never looked like a seasoned warrior anyway! Hahaha!"

Her face was flushed, her steps unsteady—she was drunk.

"Ha, came outside to 'look for Skallda,' but really just for air. Go lean against that barrel in the corner and don't make a scene."
"Yeees," Sara sang, stumbling off and collapsing by the cask.

Skallda frowned. "You're just leaving her there?"
"She looks a disgrace for a maiden, I admit," Jaba shrugged, steering Skallda inside. "But remember the last time she got truly drunk?"
"I'd rather not." Skallda shuddered. Half a year ago, Sara had gone wild in Gilgamesh's, casting spell after spell—darkening the tavern with *Morius Fog*, knocking patrons into slumber with Katino, even immolating one complainer with *Halito*. She had been barred for weeks.

"If she cast *Lahalito* inside, we'd be exiled forever. Don't worry—thanks to her mage's robe she looks like an old crone, and everyone remembers the chaos she caused. No one will bother her."

Skallda relented and followed Jaba into the smoky, song-filled tavern. At a table in the corner sat their comrades: Gadi, the towering warrior whose bulk made even Skallda seem small, and Belial, a bearded priest—the only one in the city to have mastered all cleric spells.

Both greeted them with subdued faces.
"Where's Sara?" Gadi asked.

“Outside cooling off. She’ll be fine,” Jaba replied, pouring Skallda a drink. “Here. Tonight we drink in mourning.”

“…What happened while I was away?” Skallda asked, alarmed.
“The Cant priests bungled it,” Belial groaned. “Old Silver is dust.”
“And they fleeced us of ten thousand gold besides,” Jaba spat. “Gold and Silver, both gone.”

Silver, a mage like Sara but Level 15 and their eldest, had fallen in battle the day before. Though carried to the temple, the priests had twice failed their vaunted resurrection. He was erased utterly.

Skallda drank in silence, grief heavy on his chest.

Jaba broke it with a grin. “Notice anything about me?”
Skallda squinted. “You look the same. New sword, maybe?” Peering under the table, he froze—Jaba bore a longblade’s scabbard, far too big for a thief. Drawing it slightly, Skallda saw the gleam of the Sword of Kasinart.

“That’s no thief’s weapon! Why do you have this?”
“You’re slow today, Skallda,” Jaba smirked.
“Jaba changed class,” Gadi interjected. “He’s a ninja now.”

Skallda blinked. “Impossible—ninjas require evil alignment!”
“Bolttac’s shop had a miracle find,” Jaba explained, winking. “A Dagger of Thieves. Worthless as a weapon, but enchanted so any thief can become a ninja. Fifty thousand gold—cheap, eh?”

Belial leaned forward. “Ninjas advance slowly. Staying a thief would have been wiser for growth. But with Silver gone, Jaba sought strength now, not later.”

Skallda’s chest tightened at his friend’s thoughtfulness. “Level one as a samurai, I’m no strength myself. I won’t object.”

Just then, a robed figure entered—black hood, black veil, eyes gleaming from the shadows. Jaba rose at once. “An acquaintance. Wait here.”

He returned with the stranger.
“This is Vulcan, a mage. He’s the one who brought in the dagger.”

“I am Vulcan,” the man rasped. “I have mastered every wizard’s spell.” His eyes radiated malice.

Skallda glared. “You mean to replace Silver with him?”

“Do you object?” Jaba asked carefully. Belial said nothing—he had already agreed.

“…We’ll take him. But not here. We meet tomorrow at the dungeon gates.”

Vulcan nodded and departed.

“I know you dislike it, but a mage of his mastery is rare,” Jaba soothed.
“I’ll endure it,” Skallda muttered. “But that man is no ordinary mage. Something is wrong.”

Before Jaba could laugh it off, Gadi laid a hand over his cup. “Don’t drink more. Sara hasn’t returned.”

The three looked at one another—then the tavern doors burst open as several thugs stumbled in, ablaze and screaming.

“Hot! Water—water!”

Skallda stared, stunned. “…Sara.”
“Sara!”

Scene 2. Adventurer's Inn

"In any case, I'm glad the spell I used was just a *Halito* and nothing worse."

Skallda lay down on the narrow cot for the first time in a while and let out a long breath. On the bed beside him, Gadi yawned.

Only a short while ago, both of them had been panting heavily. The reason: a bunch of men—set ablaze thanks to Sara's antics—had barged in, and in the same instant, they had bolted from Gilgamesh's tavern, scooped up Sara (who was still muttering drunkenly to herself while leaning against a barrel), and sprinted at full speed back to this adventurers' inn.

After dumping Sara in the royal suite and parting ways with Jaba and Belial, who had resigned themselves to sleeping in the stables, quite some time passed before Skallda finally spoke.

"Looks like we won't be able to show our faces at the tavern again for a while. Sara's drinking habits are really something else."

"Well, she is a mage, same as Silver was," Gadi replied, still staring at the ceiling. "She was probably hit harder by it all than the rest of us."

"Yeah…"

Lying on his back, Skallda's mind drifted back to the battle two days prior—the one that had cost Silver her life.

That day, their party had descended all the way to the tenth floor of the dungeon. That level, accessible only via a chute from the ninth floor, was ringed with jagged slabs of bedrock, a clear sign they were nearing their true objective.

It had been over a week since they first began venturing into that floor. At first, the monsters there had given them a tough time. But after Skallda and Gadi discovered swords forged by the legendary master craftsman Kasinart of old, and with solid spell support, their battles had become far easier.

On that day too, after dispatching three groups of monsters and securing some treasure, they had used a teleport zone to reach the next area. There they made camp to recover their strength and

discuss their next steps.

“At this rate, maybe we could take down Werdna,” Jaba had said.

“It does feel like there’s no one left who can stop us. I don’t think it’d be a bad idea to try,” Sara had chimed in.

“Not until you’ve mastered the level-7 spells,” Silver warned. “If I die, none of you can use *Malor* to get out of Werdna’s lair. They say you can’t leave that room without magic.”

“True,” Skallda, the party’s de facto leader, agreed. “A bit more real combat and Sara will have that next spell down. Let’s fight maybe two more battles today, then head back.”

Sara pouted a little, but she knew it was foolish to take unnecessary risks. The plan was settled.

And then, just as they broke camp to move on—

A sudden explosion bloomed in the air before them. At first, it was a tiny swirling flame, but in moments it swelled into a pale-blue fireball as tall as a man. Yet the sight lacked any sense of reality: no blast, no heat, only an eerie phenomenon.

What is that fireball?

Skallda and the rest instinctively tensed for battle.

The fireball, now about three meters across, pulsed rhythmically—expanding and contracting like a beating heart.

They had seen something like it once before: a smaller, orange-colored sphere. That one had turned out to be an interdimensional portal to the demon realm, from which a lesser demon with a goat’s head had emerged.

But this one was clearly bigger. And just as Skallda realized that, a wavering shadow took shape inside the flames.

Guh… haaaaah…

A blue-skinned demon with the horns of a ram—an unearthly being none of them had ever seen—seemed to smile. Then, in an instant, it solidified. The fireball vanished without a trace.

At once, Skallda, Gadi, and Jaba charged it with their blades, while the other three began chanting spells.

There was only one enemy. None of them thought they could lose.

But the moment Skallda's sword struck, he was shocked at how tough it was. The thick hide absorbed the blow; even the famed sword of Kasinart barely scratched it. Gadi fared no better. Jaba's dagger bounced off entirely.

And the spells—*Madalto*, *Katino*, *Montino*—all winked out before reaching their target. While they stood stunned, the demon unleashed a *Madalto* of its own—a blizzard that tore through them.

"Skallda, this is bad! We need to retreat!" Belial shouted. Silver was already on the verge of death.

"Gadi! Use the Ring of Movement!"

"On it!"

At Skallda's order, Gadi activated the ring's *Malor* teleport ability.

But the second *Madalto* struck before they could escape. Silver collapsed, dead. Only then did the teleport finally take effect.

In the instant his body was whisked away, Skallda saw the greater demon—grinning, mocking them.

…

"So, you gave up being a fighter because you couldn't touch that thing, huh?"

Gadi's voice pulled Skallda back to reality. He'd thought the man was already asleep.

"Our blades didn't even faze it. But if we'd waited for support spells, we'd have been hit with more magic. The only way was for us frontliners to take it down in one shot."

"Yeah. My sword barely scratched it."

Gadi let out a long sigh. "So… do you really think becoming a samurai will help you beat something like that?"

"I don't know. Either way, I need more experience. I've got to get my battle instincts back."

"Hmm. I don't think I've got the guts to change jobs now. If I just keep honing my skills, maybe I'll win someday anyway."

Maybe he's right. Maybe that's the wiser path.

As Skallda thought back to his dawn walk to the training grounds that morning, he remembered how many times he'd wavered.

True. It's always been like this. Back when we fought the high-ranking ninja and fighters guarding the allocation center on the fourth floor, we thought they were unbeatable. But over time, we grew strong enough to crush them in a single blow.

Surviving in Werdna's dungeon was no easy feat. Most adventurers who poured into this fortress chasing fame and fortune ended up as fodder for orcs and kobolds on the very first floor.

Yet Skallda's party had clawed their way through those battlefields, growing into one of the top elite units around. Even after losing Silver, if they kept training a replacement, they might have one day been welcomed into King Trebor's royal guard.

But that's not what I want. I want to be so strong that no one—not even King Trebor with all his terrifying might—can beat me.

For someone who'd thought that way day after day, being effortlessly swatted aside by a single monster had been a shock beyond words.

"Hey, Gadi."

"Mm?"

Gadi's voice was thick with drowsiness.

"Do you think… I'm unfit to lead the party? I mean, changing jobs now of all times…"

"Well… yeah, you kinda are," Gadi answered without hesitation.

Skallda was left speechless by the blunt reply.

"But come on—none of us thought Silver would die. Sure, the results so far look bad, but that's just bad luck. I bet becoming a samurai will turn out to be a good thing."

Speaking lightly, Gadi yawned again and shut his eyes. Soon his breathing evened out—he'd fallen asleep.

"Bad luck, huh…"

Skallda murmured to himself. Somehow, Gadi's words had eased

the knot in his chest.

Ever since changing classes, a constant anxiety had gnawed at him: Was this a mistake? He'd abandoned the path of the warrior, and there was no undoing it. Still, he decided, the time for doubt was after more real combat.

Tomorrow at sunrise, he would rise and face his first battle as a samurai.

Skallda closed his eyes.

But again, a dark cloud welled up in his heart—his unease about the black-robed mage Vulcan—and he did not fall asleep until well into the deep of night.

Scene 3. Edge of Town

The next morning.
With the chirping of birds, the darkness of night was being driven away from the fortress city. Because the town was enclosed within tall walls, its people could not glimpse the distant horizon or the morning sun rising there. Yet as the pale gray sky gradually turned into a clear blue, the residents of the city stirred and began their day.

The adventurers' inn—built so that those who challenged the labyrinth at the edge of town could rest cheaply—also came alive at dawn. By sunrise, most of its lodgers were already awake and preparing to depart. Those who had fled back with grievous wounds from monsters, however, would likely be confined to bed for a week or more.

The clatter of warriors fastening heavy iron armor and gauntlets echoed through the inn. But Skallda and his four companions had checked out early and were already heading toward the city gates.

Though his level had returned to one, Skallda's training as a samurai allowed him to wear the same weapons and armor he had borne only two days before. With the Helm of Hardiness pulled low over his brow, he strode at the head of the party.

Jaba, who had become a ninja thanks to a magical item while keeping his level intact, seemed to have purchased new armor the day before. He followed noisily behind, clattering with every step, clearly unaccustomed to the weight. Next came Gadi, as nonchalant as ever, his light-footed stride forming a sharp contrast with Jaba's clumsy march.

"This stuff's heavy and noisy—leather's way better. Hey, Gadi, do something about it, will you?"
Jaba grumbled, his own racket nearly drowning out his voice.

"That's the tradeoff for safety. Everyone feels that way at first, but you'll get used to it soon enough," Gadi replied.

Dragging her robe behind her, Sara followed, still not free from the effects of last night's heavy drinking.

"…Jaba, could you walk a little quieter? Every time your armor

clangs, it's like hammers pounding inside my head. Thanks to you, I'm dying here."

"That's your own damn fault. You downed an entire bottle even though one drink knocks you flat. Do you even remember what you did last night? I had to bolt halfway through and puked my guts out."
Jaba had no intention of walking any quieter as he shouted back.

"Ow, ow… ugh, keep your disgusting stories down, will you? And don't act like you're innocent—you guys didn't stop me either. Not much sense of camaraderie, huh?"

Sara shot a glare at Gadi and Belial, who was bringing up the rear. But Gadi looked as indifferent as ever, and Belial simply turned his head away, unwilling to meet her sharp gaze.

"Fine, fine, I was wrong. Using magic in town is forbidden, and sure, I drank too much—even if it was in Silver's memory. But leaving a young maiden passed out on a busy street? That's hardly decent. And then you shoved me into some royal suite without asking. Do you know they charged seventy gold for one night? Ugh, my head's splitting…"

She muttered on and on, more drunk than hungover. Normally, with her reddish-gold hair, green eyes, well-formed features, and fair skin, she was known as a beautiful young sorceress. But in her current state, she was as grating as the croak of a giant toad. Jaba threw up his hands in surrender.

The fortress city wasn't very large. Before long, they found themselves at the city gate.

Raising one hand in greeting, Skallda approached a guard.
"Morning. Must've been a rough night shift. Looks like you're on your own today."

"Oh, it's you. Word among your friends is you switched classes, you know."
The guard, a familiar face, rubbed his tired eyes. Since Skallda and his group came and went almost daily, they had become rather friendly with the gatekeepers.

"What's with Sara? She looks awfully sour. Spoils her pretty face."

Unable to explain last night's mess, Skallda only gave a vague nod.

“Tell me about it. Anyway, did a mage pass through earlier? Dressed head to toe in black.”

“That guy?”
The guard pointed to a spot about a hundred meters away, slanted toward the training grounds, where the labyrinth’s entrance gaped open in the earth. Because Skallda was facing the guard, it had been outside his field of view.

Turning, he saw Vulcan standing there in the morning sun, draped in a pitch-black robe like a lingering remnant of night. The man hadn’t moved an inch.

“Friend of yours? Looks shady to me. He’s been standing there like that since before dawn. Gives me the creeps.”

Bidding farewell to the guard, Skallda led Gadi and the others beyond the fortress walls—toward the labyrinth’s entrance.

Whether Vulcan noticed them or not, he remained still, head bowed. Even as unease stirred in Skallda’s chest at the sight, his heart burned with an almost painful eagerness for battle.

And behind him, Sara was still whining.
“The sunlight’s stabbing my eyes! Belial, please, cast a Cure spell on me. Or at least a Detoxify. Hey… come on, I’m begging you…”

Scene 4. Upper Floor

The Underground Labyrinth of the Great Sorcerer Werdna

It was a vast subterranean maze, erected with the full extent of Werdna's magical power and the aid of countless monsters under his command. Its location was almost offensively close to the fortress-city of the mad overlord Trebor. The labyrinth sprawled down ten levels beneath the earth, with some passages rumored to stretch directly beneath Trebor's own citadel.

The conflict between King Trebor and Werdna had its roots in this very labyrinth. Several years earlier, during the reign of Trebor's father, a shabby old wizard returned from long years of wandering study. Trebor, drunk on victory and the spoils of a recent war, generously granted him a place to live. But the wizard—none other than Werdna—took advantage of this permission. In the single week while the victory feast was being held, he completed the labyrinth, and by the time Trebor realized what had happened, Werdna had sealed himself deep underground, never again answering the king's summons.

Trebor, never known for a gentle temperament, flew into a rage. He immediately dispatched a punitive force—his elite royal guard—to exterminate Werdna. But the path was blocked by countless monsters Werdna had conjured, and the troops were annihilated. Trebor had no choice but to leave Werdna be, nursing his fury in silence. Matters came to a head, however, with the theft of his most prized possession: the magical amulet.

This amulet, which Trebor always wore upon his person, was the very thing that had made the neighboring nations fear him as a tyrant-lord gone mad. Merely carrying it allowed wounds to heal at many times the speed of any ordinary magical item. Once worn, it created a magical barrier that could repel any attack. As long as Trebor possessed this amulet, his armies could not possibly be defeated.

And yet, Werdna crept into Trebor's bedchamber while he slept and stole it. Trebor's wrath burned hotter than ever—but without the amulet, his defenses were weakened, and he could not risk throwing more of his precious guards into the deathtrap of the labyrinth.

Thus came the decree: wandering adventurers would be sent into the underground maze. Whoever succeeded in retrieving the amulet would be rewarded with induction into Trebor's royal guard. Trebor himself would have preferred to storm the labyrinth and carve Werdna into pieces with his own hands, but his ministers restrained him, and in the end he accepted this plan reluctantly.

Yet the decree brought great benefit to Trebor's citadel. Though perilous, the chance to join the most powerful army in the known lands drew desperate warriors and mages from across the world. The influx of adventurers revitalized the kingdom's economy overnight.

So two years passed. None had yet defeated Werdna—some had even stumbled into his chamber by mistake, only to teleport away in panic before combat could begin—but little by little, adventurers of true skill had begun to appear.

The corridors of the labyrinth were dark and dank, the stagnant air heavy and still. One might imagine oneself in a world of nothingness, so complete was the blackness. Now and then, the muffled drip of water could be heard, followed by the scurrying of small creatures startled in the dark. Beyond that, silence reigned. There was no sign of human life nearby.

Creeeak.

Suddenly, the shriek of a hinge echoed. Somewhere, a door had opened.

A pale yellow glow floated up in the darkness. Startled, countless small animals scurried away—the shadows had concealed more life than one might have guessed.

The light came from an old lamp, likely fueled by the fat of some underground beast. It gave off thick, sooty smoke, barely illuminating its surroundings, instead casting its glare on the one who held it.

Half-emerging from the door, lamp extended, was a small humanoid monster, barely shoulder-high to a grown man. Its lower jaw jutted forward, two tusks protruding upward past its lips. Its nose was crushed, its eyes were muddy and cruel, and two horns like those of an ox jutted from the filthy, matted hair on its head. This crude creature was the lowest of the monsters in Werdna's labyrinth: an

orc.

Seeing the passage empty, the orc slunk fully into view. It wore a suit of beast-hide armor so soaked in fluids and blackened with age that one could scarcely guess how long it had been worn. For the orc, this was “leather armor.”

Three more orcs followed, each armed with whatever they could manage: a rusty dagger, or in one case nothing more than a sharpened stick.

The four gathered, lamp in hand, and muttered among themselves.

“I feel like we forgot something today, brothers,” said the lamp-bearer, apparently the leader.
“Yeah, me too. What was it?”
“Hmm…”

At that moment, one orc’s stomach growled loudly.
“I got it! We haven’t eaten yet today!”

The others cheered, stomping their feet and drooling with joy. Why such news made them so happy was unclear, but to the orcs, the thought of food was cause enough for celebration.

“Good thing you remembered, boss—we might’ve starved to death!”
“True enough. We’ve been lazing around all day, after all! Guwahahaha!”

“Shut it!” the leader snapped, baring his teeth. At once the others froze, the echoes fading into silence.
“Idiots! What if the prey hears us? I’ll eat you instead!”

One orc cowered at being singled out.
“Boss… what kind of prey are we after?”
“Let’s see. Dwarves are too tough. Elves, too little meat. Gnomes taste foul. Best bet’s humans.”
“Humans! That’s the stuff!”

The orcs stomped and roared, their lamp casting grotesque shadows on the walls.

Then another orc came running from deeper in the passage.
“Hey! Humans are coming! And one’s a soft-fleshed woman! Come on, help me out!”
“A woman!? A woman!”

At this, the orcs went wild with glee, dancing and capering. Human women were rare in the labyrinth, and the thought of such a feast sent them into frenzy.

“Quiet, you fools!” barked the leader, though he himself had been just as excited moments earlier.
“These humans are newcomers, right?” he asked the scout.
“Sure are. They’ve got decent armor, but the two in front are clumsy. Fresh meat, no doubt.”
“Good! Let’s go, brothers! Tonight we feast!”

With a shout, the lamp was snuffed out. Footsteps thundered briefly, then silence returned to that part of the labyrinth.

At the labyrinth’s entrance, the adventurers had gathered with Vulcan. Forming their ranks, they made their way toward the lift to the fourth underground floor.

Jaba led the vanguard, followed by Skallda and Gadi, with Belial, Vulcan, and Sara bringing up the rear.

As ever, Jaba clattered noisily with every step. Skallda, still unaccustomed to his new role as a samurai, wore his armor awkwardly, unable to move naturally.

The pair looked like greenhorns on their very first delve. Yet anyone with a sharp eye would notice the graceful, weightless stride of Gadi behind them—movements possible only for a warrior of “Master” rank, level 13.

“Hey, Jaba,” Gadi called in his easygoing tone. “Make a bit less noise, or you’ll draw every monster in the place.”
“Don’t need you tellin’ me that! But it ain’t like I can help it. Weren’t you the one who said I’d get used to this fast? Well, I ain’t, not one bit!”
“Maybe you just don’t have the knack.”

Spoken in Gadi’s casual way, the jab carried no sting.
“Tch. Just watch—I’ll manage it,” Jaba muttered, beginning to adjust his steps to quiet the clanking.

Skallda, walking between them, felt the same unease as on his very first expedition. The darkness dulled his senses more than he had expected.

This isn’t good.

Belial had suggested he move back to the fourth rank, but Skallda had insisted on the front for the sake of spellcasting efficiency. Now, though, he wondered if it would have been better to let Belial handle close combat. A priest rarely used attack spells, but with Skallda's lack of skill, even Belial's mace might serve them better. And if Belial fell—paralyzed, or worse—the party would be left without healing.

A light tap on his helmet—Gadi again.
"Still brooding? Feeling nervous?"
"…Yeah," Skallda admitted. "Just the other day I felt safe even on the first floor barehanded. Now look at me. Pathetic."
"Well, you've got stamina at least. That's more than the rookies. Your armor class is fine too. Leave the fighting to us." He nodded toward Jaba.
"See? Already moving quieter. Ninja training does wonders."

Sure enough, though Jaba still grumbled, his movements were those of a seasoned warrior. It wasn't just the magic that had made him a ninja—he had the natural talent for it.

"With skill like that, he'll master the longsword soon enough. Relax, leader."
"…Alright. I'll be counting on you all today."
"Then don't forget to come up with a proper plan."

Skallda only raised his thumb and lowered his visor in reply.

Sara, at the rear, had sobered up thanks to Belial's detoxification spell. Normally sensible, she only became reckless under drink. Now clear-headed, her keen mage's intellect turned to studying Vulcan, who walked just ahead of her.

Draped in a black robe that seemed ready to merge with the labyrinth's darkness, Vulcan had hardly spoken since they'd met at the entrance. His presence was eerie, more like a shadow-stalker creeping silently in the dark than a wizard.

Vulcan, was it…

Sara tried to recall his name among the famed magi of recent years. Wizards who mastered all spells were always spoken of. She prided herself on never forgetting such things, and there were not many high-level mages to remember.

Werdna, of course. Then Trebor's aide Grebnarg. The legendary

Hasturgal in the northern mountains. My own teacher, Basil. And Silver, perhaps. No one else. Certainly no one in this citadel has mastered their spells—Trebor's guard are mostly warriors, and the few samurai barely manage level-4 spells. There was that one, Nuckelavee, but he died leading a punitive force…

So who is this man? He must have come from some faraway land.

At that moment, Vulcan halted and muttered:
"Enemies…"

Sara peered past his shoulder. From the darkness ahead, a band of orcs came charging.

Scene 5. Upper Floor 2

Kee—!
A shrill, grating scream, like glass being clawed, echoed through the dark corridor.

At the same moment, five orc brutes came charging.

“A woman, a woman!”
“A human! F-food… a feast!”

The only thing these orcs could think about was filling their bellies with the party before them. The ambush was clumsy, but their victims looked startled—so the surprise had worked. If they could cut down the warriors in front with their first strike, the spellcasters behind could be butchered at leisure.

Kiki!
The first orc lunged with a wooden spear at the man in the lead. The man, clearly unused to battle, seemed to take the blow full on. Two more orcs slashed at the second man in line; judging by their squeals, both had struck true.

The leader of the band, with the last orc, rushed at the rearmost warrior.

The first two are finished. Kill this one, and all that’s left is a priest and a weak mage. And after that… a woman’s flesh, at last. Guha-ha-ha.

Drooling with gluttonous visions, the orc leader swung his dagger down into the gap at the warrior’s shoulder plate.

Blood sprayed. The jolt through his hand told him he had dealt a grave wound. Without a pause, the other orc smashed its club into the man’s skull.

Dead, maybe?

To be sure, the leader leaned down and peered under the warrior’s face. The man wore a ring on his head—some magic trinket perhaps—but his eyes were wide open and still, blood streaming down from a split brow.

Dead.

Satisfied, the leader turned to rush at the back line. But then—

Gugyah!

A strangled cry from behind—where the “dead” warriors had fallen. The leader whipped his head around.

One of his comrades was standing there, gouting blood from a hundred cuts. No—not standing. What remained no longer resembled an orc at all.

The corpse crumpled with a sodden slap, like a soaked rag thrown to the floor. Something like a head rolled away.

“B-big bro!” squealed another, the one who had helped bring down the warrior just moments ago. The leader turned in shock—only to see his terrified ally suddenly flatten, sucked into the ground, and burst into meat. The impact shook the corridor like thunder.

The “dead” warrior, Gadi, had struck. His honed body unleashed such force that his blade didn’t so much cut the fattened orc as shatter it.

“Ahh, damn. That ambush almost had me,” he muttered, shaking gore from his sword. He slowly turned toward the petrified leader.

“That shoulder wound… was your doing, wasn’t it?”

Giki!

The leader let out a voiceless shriek, stumbling back. Even this thick-skulled brute now realized they had attacked a party far beyond them.

Meanwhile, Skallda, who had borne the earlier assault of two orcs, wrestled with his own excitement. His new body, less than half as strong as when he’d been a warrior, frustrated him—but this was his first true battle as a samurai, and the thrill was hard to contain.

A samurai cuts with the soul.

He remembered the words of the Samurai Master who had trained him at the hall of job change. When he had first heard them, in that cold wooden dojo, Skallda had nearly laughed aloud.

“Do not mock, Skallda. This is what makes a samurai a samurai.”

The elven master—aged, yet brimming with vitality, especially in his eyes—had rebuked him then, handing him a sword unlike any he had wielded before: a single-edged, gently curved blade, far

thinner than his usual weapons.

“This sword…?”

“Strange shape, isn’t it? It is called a katana. It draws forth the full power of the samurai.”

Skeptical, Skallda had taken it. Lighter than any normal sword, yet weighty in its balance.

“Beautiful, yes—but fragile. Why call this the best weapon? It looks like it would snap against armor.”

“You understand well the way of warriors: to cut with weight and force. But a samurai does not. The samurai cuts with ki—with the soul—channeled through the blade.”

The master had placed before him a heavy stone, the size of a human head.

“Can you cut this?”

Skallda had stared at it. “With my old sword, I could smash it—but ruin the blade. With this toy? Impossible.”

“Watch closely.”

The master took the katana, raised it high. The air thickened, pressing down, a force born of him alone.

A sharp exhalation.

Yah!

The blade flashed white, lightning skimming the stone. A heartbeat later, the rock split silently in two, toppling apart with glass-smooth faces. The wooden floor beneath was untouched.

Stunned, Skallda could only trace the perfect seam with his fingers.

“Incredible… this is ki?”

“Yes. This is why the samurai are said to wield the mightiest power in battle. And with training—”

The master had turned, and in a blink, drawn and sheathed again. A hanging demon mask across the dojo split in two, falling to the ground with a dry clatter.

“This is iai. The culmination of the samurai’s art. Not easily

mastered. First, you must train."

And train he did—through endless hours within the dojo's magic field, where time itself slowed, days of hardship crammed into a single "day."

That was why Skallda had chosen the path of the samurai: to claim such overwhelming swordplay as his own.

Now, in the corridor, he recalled that training. He leveled his blade at the orc before him. Breathing deep, steady, he fixed his gaze not on the enemy, but on the sword's edge. His body filled with power, rising from legs to core, to arms and neck.

Shhh!

With a hiss, he poured it all into a single downward strike.

White blankness filled his vision—the flare of his own ki. For an instant, time slowed. The orc's terrified face froze, then its body split clean down the middle, falling in halves as blood sprayed like dark mist.

It cut.

Skallda exulted inwardly. Weak as the foe was, it had been slain by the samurai's essence.

Three orc corpses now littered the ground: one pulped by Gadi, one cleaved by Skallda, one shredded earlier by Jaba, the ninja—once a thief, and still fast as ever.

The two survivors stood rigid, paralyzed with fear, surrounded by the three frontliners. Even orcs, lowly as they were, knew when death was certain.

The leader and his crony dropped their weapons and groveled. Their language was incomprehensible, but their submission plain. Normally, as Good adventurers, the party would never strike down foes without will to fight.

But these orcs had ambushed them first, and Gadi still fumed at his wound.

"What now, Skallda? Looks like they've given up," Jaba asked, nudging one with his foot.

"We could spare them," Skallda said, "but Gadi won't be satisfied."

“Of course not,” Gadi growled, twirling his sword dangerously.

“Your wound can be healed by the priest’s spell. Killing the defenseless is beneath us,” said Belial, the cleric, stern in his refusal to break his vows.

At that, Skallda sheathed his blade.

“I agree with Belial. Killing these orcs gains us nothing but a bitter aftertaste.”

With a reluctant snort, Gadi crouched by the cowering leader, tapped his bowed head with the flat of his sword, and whispered:

“Count yourself lucky.”

The two orcs slowly rose, sensing their chance, and began edging away into the dark.

Then—suddenly—a swirl of orange fire engulfed them.

Mahalito!?

The shapes of the orcs writhed within, then collapsed. As they fell, the fire vanished in an instant.

Skallda turned sharply.

There stood Vulcan, eyes cold as ice.

Scene 6. Upper Floor 3

A strange atmosphere filled the party.

It had been less than an hour since they left the inn at dawn and entered this labyrinth from its outskirts. They were only on the first basement level. Skallda had just changed his profession, but this wasn't a depth where a party of certified level 12 or higher adventurers should struggle with the monsters living there.

However, an ominous shadow was already beginning to fall on the path of this exploration.

The cause, of course, was Vulcan's unilateral killing of the orcs. He had cast a *Mahalito* spell on two orcs who had surrendered, attacking them from behind.

Mahalito is a multi-monster attack spell that wizards learn early on, creating a vortex of flames over a medium-sized area. Its power is not particularly great—about three times that of the Harito (Lesser Flame) spell Sarah cast at the tavern—but it was more than enough to incinerate a couple of orcs.

Those who live in this world are governed by two major codes of conduct. One is Good, which values humanity and shows compassion even to monsters. The other is Evil, which is self-centered and can abandon all emotion for the sake of profit.

These codes of Good and Evil are merely behavioral guidelines and do not define the nature of a being itself. For example, even humans and dwarves, who are of an evil nature, are much closer to Good than demons or dragons.

However, it is a fact that these codes are contradictory, and generally, people of Good and Evil do not try to associate with each other. Their ways of thinking are so different that even sharing a table at a tavern can lead to a fight. Entering a labyrinth together as a party was almost unheard of unless there were extraordinary circumstances. After all, both are bound by the strictest codes when fighting monsters.

Among monsters, too, there are some who are friendly to adventurers, with the exception of the lowest-level creatures directly under Wordna's command. These monsters were what made

the conflict between Good and Evil so decisive. This is because people of Good have a rule that they must never attack a creature that does not show hostility, even if it is a monster. Conversely, people of Evil have a rule that they must not let any opponent go, even if it's a slime. If a single party had both Good and Evil members, one of them would have to violate their code.

That's why parties are composed of either all Good or all Evil members, or they include those not bound by a code—the Neutrals.

Skallda and Belial were Good, and Vulcan was Evil. Sooner or later, this problem was bound to surface.

"This is awful," muttered Gadi, poking at the smoldering remains of the orcs with his toe. Even he, a Neutral, seemed to feel a sense of revulsion at Vulcan's method of incinerating them from behind without warning. This was rare for Gadi, and his tone was laced with intense reproach and disgust.

For Skallda and Belial, who were Good, being made to feel like they were complicit in this treacherous act was a humiliation. Skallda's anger was particularly intense, as his position as a leader had also been trampled upon.

"Vulcan, what's the meaning of this?"

Skallda's voice was completely flat. He was forcibly suppressing his explosive emotions.

"Depending on your answer, this won't end well."

Vulcan said nothing. Only his eyes gleamed with a fleeting, sneering light.

Skallda gnashed his back teeth. One hand slowly reached for the hilt of his sword. A chilling, hair-raising killing intent radiated from him.

Fighting among party members is the most dangerous act in a labyrinth. Since a party is a group of individuals with similar levels of power, a conflict won't be settled quickly. Additionally, the party's greatest advantage—its combination of skills—is completely shattered during the fight. If monsters attack at that moment, they'd have to fight under far more disadvantageous conditions than usual.

As the leader, Skallda was fully aware of this. However, after having his pride so deeply wounded and being treated like a fool,

he couldn't simply laugh it off and back down. Despite his class change, he was still an impetuous 18-year-old youth.

The air grew tense. Everyone present could feel the same ringing in their ears that Skallda had experienced in the class change dojo. The ki inside Skallda was being compressed.

Kuk-kuk-kuk...

Suddenly, Vulcan let out a muffled laugh. The focus of Skallda's concentration was broken, and his tension eased.

"How foolish a man is who is bound by the code of Good. To have a party feud just because a couple of orcs were taken care of," he said in a raspy voice that seemed to rise from the depths of the earth. "The very idea that a fledgling samurai like you could contend with me is too amusing for words."

"Is that your answer?"

Skallda casually drew his sword. The blade, which had just slain the orcs, was completely spotless, reflecting the dim light of their small lamps.

The air between the two, who were now glaring at each other, became incredibly tense, far more so than before. The tension was so thick it felt like you could get burned just by getting close.

Everyone in the party felt that they had to stop this fight. On one side was a master of all forms of magic, and on the other, a samurai who, despite being new to his class change, held the legendary sword Cuisinart. This was a battle that likely wouldn't end until one of them was dead.

In a close-quarters fight, Skallda would have the advantage. A wizard can only wear a cloth robe, and their physical strength is significantly lower than a warrior's or a samurai's. A single blow from the samurai would easily slip under the robe and deeply gash his flesh.

However, Skallda was still not fully accustomed to being a samurai, and his agility had dropped considerably. On the other hand, judging by the way Vulcan had cast the spell on the orcs, he could apparently cast magic with terrifying speed. If he could use a powerful spell first, the tables would turn instantly.

Gadi and Jaba exchanged glances, and just as they were about to

intervene to stop them, Vulcan revealed his hand, clad in a black glove, from under his robe. He crossed it in front of his chest and began to weave a complex hand sign.

Tiltowait!

Sarah had seen this same gesture when Silver cast a spell. Both wizards and priests perform more actions as the level of their spells increases. The sign Vulcan was making was clearly for a level 7 spell, the highest level.

Skallda also realized what his opponent was about to cast. *Tiltowait*, the most powerful offensive spell known in this world. It has a devastating power that is almost guaranteed to kill any monster in the labyrinth without magic resistance. It is a spell of slaughter, spreading an explosive shockwave and flames over a much wider area than *Mahalito*. Skallda wasn't confident he would survive taking a direct hit.

Just then, Gadi suddenly tackled him from behind. Skallda had been so focused on Vulcan that he hadn't noticed his approach. He saw that Jaba had Vulcan similarly pinned down.

"Stop it, both of you! Fighting to the death in a place like this is ridiculous!" Sarah yelled as she wedged herself between them.

But even as he was being held by Jaba, Vulcan did not break his stance.

"It was that fool who provoked me. And he is the one who will die. If you don't move, you will share the same fate."

Vulcan tensed both of his arms. His black robe billowed out radially from his body, and a sudden gust of wind that rose from beneath him flung Jaba away, who was desperately trying to restrain him. This was the magical wind that precedes the summoning of *Tiltowait*.

"Look out! Everyone, run!" Jaba yelled as he fell backward. If they didn't move, Skallda, Gadi, and Sarah would be caught in the direct line of the spell.

Just as Skallda closed his eyes, thinking it was over, Belial's angry voice rang out.

"Move aside, Vulcan! An enemy is here!"

Vulcan was taken aback by the unexpected words.

Following Belial's gaze, he turned to see that four undead kobolds had crept up on them, their movements stiff and jerky, a characteristic of undead monsters.

Undead monsters are not creatures that have been resurrected from the dead. They are fiends created by infusing corpses with a sort of false life through evil magic. Most living creatures can be turned into undead in this way, and if the caster's ability is high enough, they can even turn the corpse of a great dragon into a zombie that moves of its own accord.

Monsters that are resurrected as undead usually have higher attack power than before and gain some resistance to spells. However, while it may seem like they are superior to living monsters, this is not the case. Anyone with the abilities of a priest can sever this evil curse of the undead and return them to their original state as a corpse. This ability is called Dispel.

The undead kobolds that appeared were the least cursed among undead monsters. A priest of Belial's level could easily lay them to rest.

Belial ignored Vulcan, who was in the direct line of the enemy, and began the motions for Dispel. Unlike a magical attack, Dispel has no effect on living beings.

He extended his open left hand and slowly made a cross with his right. His left palm began to fill with a soft white light. As he closed his eyes, he saw Vulcan roll sideways to get out of the way.

"Oh, God. Oh, God of our creation. I beseech you, release the souls of these lost ones."

He muttered the prayer in a unique intonation and then opened his eyes wide. Instantly, the white light flowed down Belial's body and was absorbed into the ground, from which several pale blue bolts of lightning shot through the stone floor.

The undead kobolds crumbled with surprising ease, like puppets with their strings cut. The holy light that coursed through the earth had severed the evil magic that had risen from the depths. The monsters instantly became four piles of bones.

Looking around, Vulcan was pressed against the corridor wall,

staring at the piles of kobold corpses. It seemed that this brief scene had discouraged him from continuing the conflict.

"Well then, Skallda, what will you do?" Belial asked Skallda, who was still holding his sword. "Will you continue our party feud?"

"Are you done with it?" Skallda quickly sheathed his sword and returned the question.

"I suppose so. I've had more than enough cold sweat for one day. After all, I've never had a *Tiltowait* spell cast on me before."

"Seriously, I thought my heart was going to stop," Jaba shouted, still lying on his back, propped up on his elbows.

"It's true that having our code of conduct ignored is unbearable, but what just happened proves that this man has truly mastered all of his spells. Once we get to the 10th basement level, there won't be any enemies who will surrender, so at that point, whether we are Good or Evil won't matter. Level 7 magic will be useful."

"This is the guy who was willing to kill us!"

"Just as we value the code of Good, Vulcan has the code of Evil. It's not right to expect him to follow our rules. You were ready to kill him, too. In this case, both sides are at fault."

"Hmm..." Skallda was at a loss for words.

"You are too focused on your own strength right now. The combined strength of a party is also a kind of strength. With Vulcan, our strength will increase significantly. You must only think of that."

Scene 7. Dark Zone

Dark Zones, as they are called, are scattered throughout Werdna's maze. This particular area is, as the name suggests, a pitch-black abyss. Not only is it impervious to the light of the small lamps adventurers typically carry, but even the most powerful magical lights fail to illuminate it. What's more, it even nullifies the effects of constant light, which would normally persist indefinitely while underground.

The most fitting description would be a dense, concentrated mist of near-absolute darkness. It's almost like a gaseous life form that swallows all light. There are various theories about its nature, such as it being a magical force field created by Werdna, or a place where the influence of another dimension, the demon world, is particularly strong. To this day, it remains a mysterious area whose true nature is unknown.

This Dark Zone extends vertically and horizontally from the center of the first basement floor. Because the darkness is so thick you can't even see your hand in front of your face, no adventurer wants to set foot in it. Even seasoned parties who have traversed it many times before can get lost.

However, once adventurers are certified as Level 7 or higher, they have no choice but to enter the Dark Zone. Beyond it lies a lift that can take them directly down to the fourth basement floor.

Of the ten total floors, one can descend one by one down to the eighth floor using the staircase provided on each level. However, this requires traveling through the entire labyrinthine maze and still doesn't lead to the lowest floor where Werdna resides.

That's why the Werdna subjugation team, once dispatched by Trebor, installed two lifts: one connecting the first and fourth floors, and another connecting the fourth and ninth floors. An individual with sufficient skill can use this route to reach the tenth floor in a very short amount of time.

Skallda and his party were steadily making their way through this Dark Zone.

The air was thick and heavy, clinging to them. It felt as though they were walking through water. But it wasn't humidity; it was

something else—an unknown energy filling the darkness. This energy seemed to be the very source that extinguished even the most powerful magical light.

The party walked on without a word. The only sounds were the clanking of metal and suppressed breathing, the sole clues to their mutual existence in the darkness.

Skallda walked with his eyes closed, sensing Jaba in front of him and Gadi behind. It was a habit he had adopted shortly after he started getting used to the Dark Zone. He figured that since he couldn't see anyway, closing his eyes would sharpen his other senses.

Before, closing his eyes didn't really change anything. It only helped him overcome the uneasy feeling of losing his sight, as if his eyes were open but couldn't perceive anything.

Now, however, by not relying on his eyes, he could sense his surroundings with astonishing clarity. With a little concentration, he could even hear the sound of Sara's breathing at the very back of the line.

Skallda realized that this was a result of his training the day before. His training in the ki essential for a samurai had made him terrifyingly sensitive to the presence of others. Despite his anxiety over the decline in his five senses due to his class change, he knew that mastering this ability would more than compensate for it.

He first noticed his ability to read the ki of others during his first battle as a samurai—the fight with the pig ogres just a few dozen minutes ago. He hadn't closed his eyes then, but by focusing his gaze on the tip of his sword, he could feel the presence of the opposing pig ogre as though it were a tangible thing.

The presence the pig ogre had exuded was one of surprise and fear. Now, recalling it with a clear mind, he realized he had been reading the opponent's emotions as well.

Even with the training one receives at a dojo, a samurai typically needs to go through nearly a hundred battles before they can manipulate their own ki and read the ki of others. The fact that Skallda had mastered this ability, which is considered the true essence of a samurai, in just a single battle was a testament to his remarkable talent.

Amidst the mixed presences of his party members, Skallda tried to sense the ki of Vulcan.

This was the same person he had almost fought to the death with earlier. If the monster's ambush hadn't interrupted them, one of them would have surely died.

No, it would have definitely been me who died.

As he recalled that moment, facing Vulcan, a dark cloud of thought rose in his mind.

The feeling that he would have been killed no matter what he did the moment Vulcan cast the Explosion spell was so vivid and certain it refused to leave his mind.

I couldn't read his actions. I felt like no matter how I attacked, he would evade it, and I couldn't take that first step.

It was completely different from his fight with the pig ogre.

Physical movements follow the ebb and flow of "ki." If you can understand the movement of someone's "ki," you can vaguely predict what they will do next. During the fight with the pig ogre, he could feel the movements of its fingertips. But when he faced Vulcan, he couldn't read a single piece of it. He couldn't feel his ki at all.

Vulcan, who was right in front of him, felt like a non-existent phantom.

That very uncertainty had paralyzed Skallda. He felt as though his body was filled with lead and he couldn't move.

It was like a toad stared down by a snake. The thought filled Skallda with an emotion akin to anger. Not at Vulcan, but a furious rage directed at himself.

What did I become a samurai for?!

He felt as though the part of him that wanted to be stronger was denouncing the part that had felt fear. A warrior would have had no hesitation in striking him down. But he had been so caught up in ki that he couldn't even fight as he intended.

He could accept losing to Jaba and Gadi, as he had just changed classes. A Level 1 samurai was not going to defeat a Level 13 warrior or ninja.

But to be intimidated by Vulcan, a wizard, who was least suited for close-quarters combat, was unforgivable. He would never forget this, no matter how strong he became.

To be honest, he wanted to fight Vulcan again and defeat him even if it meant dying in the process. But he couldn't. If he were on a solo adventure, that would be one thing, but Skallda was the leader of four allies. He couldn't initiate a conflict that would weaken the party's fighting force regardless of who died.

That's why he was moving forward with Vulcan in the party again, with a burning fury in his guts.

“After today's adventure, you'll be able to regain your original strength. Then you won't have to force yourself to keep Vulcan in the party. You only have to endure for today.”

Belial's whisper had also contributed to Skallda's giving in. Belial, a good priest whose precepts were even more strict than his, was bending his own rules to accompany him on his practical training, so he felt he could endure it for a day.

Even so, he wanted to at least detect the presence of Vulcan, which he couldn't sense at all before. It was a matter of pride for Skallda.

But still, there was no sign of Vulcan's presence. It was as if he had left the formation altogether.

Suddenly, Skallda was seized by the illusion that Vulcan had silently crept up on him, melting into the darkness, and he opened his eyes wide. But all he saw was the same solid black darkness. A chill ran down his neck as if a cold knife was pressed against it, and Skallda shook his head.

"We're almost at that small room. What do you wanna do, Skallda?"

Jaba called out from the front. Sensing him stop, Skallda also halted. Gadi and the others behind him seemed to stop as well, one after another.

"Ouch!"

Sara cried out from the back. She hadn't noticed Vulcan stop and had bumped her nose into his back.

The room Jaba was referring to was a small room in the middle of the Dark Zone. When he asked what they wanted to do, he was

asking if they should stop by or just pass it by.

"We're stopping by," Skallda replied without hesitation. "We need to tell him about Silver. Just me—no, Sara, you come with me, too."

"Okay, I'll go," she responded with a tearful voice, as if the bump to her nose had been quite severe. Jaba was barely holding back his laughter, making a chuckling sound.

"Alright Jaba, wait here for a bit. We'll be right back."

"Heeheehee, okay, you can count on me, heh, heh. I'm not a big fan of that old man anyway, puhaha."

Jaba, who was desperately trying not to laugh, finally burst out laughing when Skallda spoke to him. Just then, Sara, who had moved forward, hit him with her favorite staff. She was aiming based on the sound of his laughter and managed to strike the back of Jaba's helmet.

"Don't just stand there laughing. Come on, Skallda, let's go."

Sara was in a hurry, not even bothering to look at the writhing Jaba.

"Ah, okay."

As he was about to start walking, impressed by her skill at striking him without any noticeable presence, he sensed Gadi move from behind.

"I'll go too," Gadi said simply.

Leaving the remaining three to wait, Skallda, Gadi, and Sara began walking along the wall. Skallda's fingers soon touched a wooden door, and he knocked lightly.

"Who is it?" a sharp voice came from inside.

"It's us."

"Ah, it's you. Come in." Skallda slowly pushed the door open. It seemed to be well-maintained, as it didn't make the unpleasant creaking sound of other doors in the maze.

The moment he stepped through the door, his vision was instantly flooded with light. Coming from a place with no light, his eyes couldn't endure the sudden change and were dazzled.

After a few seconds, Skallda's vision finally returned. The room, which came into vague focus, was not actually that bright. It was lit only by a lamp slightly larger than the ones Skallda and his party carried.

The room, like the rest of the maze, was covered with stone walls, but it seemed to be well-kept and a very comfortable space. One of the walls was used entirely as a bookshelf, with countless book spines lined up as far as the eye could see. The majority were valuable spell books that anyone who studied magic would desire. Besides the shelves, ancient books and scrolls were piled high throughout the room, making the small five-meter-square room feel even more cramped.

In the center of the room was a solid wooden desk, on which were many books, notebooks, and a complex assembly of flasks, test tubes, and other long glass tubes.

In front of the desk, a man was seated in an old chair, his back to them.

"It's been a while," Skallda said, taking a step forward. Gadi and Sara entered the room as well, squinting.

The man slowly stood up and turned around. He was a middle-aged elf with a face etched with severe wrinkles. Middle-aged, though since elves are much longer-lived than humans like Skallda, he could already be considered an old man.

The elf had a long beard and was clad in a pure white robe with not a speck of dirt. This man was the mysterious hermit who could use a spell to forcibly teleport others.

He was an enigmatic sorcerer who had taken up residence in this room since adventurers began seeking Werdna's head, and one of the most famous figures in the maze. Every adventurer, at some point, had strayed into this room and been sent back to the castle by his counter-teleportation spell.

Forcibly being sent back to the castle might seem like an inconvenience to an adventurer who has gone through the trouble of descending into the maze. However, most adventurers who mistakenly enter this room are just starting their journey. Many parties had been saved by this elf when they had run out of healing spells and were dying from poison traps. In this world, where

priestly spells and resurrection at temples were highly developed, failure could turn one's body to ash, with a chance of annihilation. The fear of death was great, even if it wasn't an absolute certainty.

Mabiro Mahama Dilomato.

This counter-teleportation spell, unlike the transfer spell which uses the caster's ability to teleport to move the entire party, moves an object using pure magical power. Naturally, it can be used on an opponent during combat, and if cast to trap a monster inside a stone wall deep within the maze, it's a terrifying magic that can annihilate them more surely than the Explosion spell.

Even someone who has mastered all Level 7 spells cannot necessarily use this magic. It is an effect that can only be invoked by chance when casting the mutation or great mutation spell, which even the caster doesn't know what will happen. Moreover, mutation spells greatly deplete one's power. They were not spells an ordinary caster would use unless it was absolutely necessary.

Since the elf was capable of such powerful magic, he could, at a whim, seal away rude brutes who kicked open his door into a thick stone wall so they would never be seen again. Politely sending them back to the castle was nothing short of helping them on their adventure.

Because they understood this, a few grateful adventurers would often visit the room with gifts of thanks. The elven hermit would scowl and shoo them away with a look of great inconvenience, but in the shadows of the piled-up books, there were so many treasured metals and alcohol that his popularity was overflowing.

The elf gave the three a sharp glance, then sat back down in his chair.

"Skallda and Sara, and the big one is Gadi, wasn't it? What brings you here today?"

"I'll make it brief. We have something we must inform you of."

Skallda spoke respectfully. He, too, had been helped by this elf when he first began his journey in the maze.

"Silver has died."

"That one? You should just revive him." The elf furrowed his brow.

"We took him to the temple, but the priests failed to resurrect him twice."

The hand stroking his stubborn beard stopped abruptly. The elf's green eyes looked directly into Skallda's.

"He was annihilated?"

"Yes."

"I see, annihilated..."

For just a moment, it seemed to Skallda that the old elf's expression had become solemn. It was the first time he had ever seen such an expression on a man who never broke his perpetually grumpy face.

"There's nothing to be done if they failed at the temple in Cant... He was a great man. For you all, as well."

Scene 8. Dark Zone 2

For two years, the old elf had resided in this labyrinth and had encountered nearly a thousand adventurers. It was said that no fewer than a thousand more had found their way into the city, so only a handful had even reached his room on the first floor. Still, that was a considerable number.

Currently, about ten new adventurers a day would arrive in this fortified city, dreaming of joining Trebor's Royal Guard. Of those, only about one in ten would manage to survive two or three real battles without becoming monster bait. As they descended to lower levels, they were further weeded out, and the total number of adventurers had now stabilized at around 200. It was truly a narrow gate, a mere 2%.

Of these adventurers, only a select few, like Skallda and his party, were remembered by name and considered worthy of the elf's time. If anyone he disliked came to visit, he would, without question, send them packing back to the castle. He was that difficult.

Even Skallda and his companions felt they had no choice but to interact with the elf as disciples would a master, for he was a being of solitary spirit.

The only person who had ever been able to speak with the elf on equal terms was Silver.

Knowing this, Skallda and his party understood the elf's shock and grief on a profound level. Though he tried to maintain his composure, he couldn't completely hide the emotion of losing his one true confidant. The mental blow he had suffered was perhaps even greater than that of the other members of Skallda's party.

"He was an old man who had already crossed his seventieth peak. If he was lost in the Temple of Cant, it must have been his destiny…" the elf murmured again, as if trying to convince himself.

Indeed, Silver was an adventurer of an unbelievably advanced age. No matter how much a warrior's body was trained, it would only decline after the age of fifty. This was, by its very nature, an age of violence ruled by the power of swords and magic, so it was rare for anyone to survive as an active adventurer past fifty. Many would instead amass a fortune before then and retire from the front lines

of their respective classes. The newcomers to this labyrinth were mostly hopeful teenagers, with the rest being seasoned veterans up to their mid-thirties who had gained experience in other lands.

Silver was a first-class wizard from a previous era, having lived in the fortress since the time of Trebor's father, the former king. He had long since retired, but at the earnest request of Skallda and his companions, he had joined their party a year ago. Though he hadn't reached the level of a great sorcerer, he was a man known throughout the land as one of the few wizards who had mastered all spells.

"It's no excuse, but I regret pulling a retired Silver back into this. He was just helping us with our training… even though he had no interest in Trebor's Royal Guard," Skallda said.

"No, he was a man who enjoyed putting himself in the midst of battle. He would have been satisfied to die fighting… Besides, he was a man who never did anything he didn't want to. If he didn't want to be with you, he would never have lent a hand. He had no children, so perhaps he was incredibly happy to help adventurers your age, like a grandson, become full-fledged adults. He often said that being with you made him feel thirty years younger."

Perhaps realizing he was being unusually talkative, the old elf fell silent for a moment.

"Can you tell me, Skallda? Which monster killed Silver?"

Recalling the humiliation of being easily handled by the monster, Skallda bit his lip.

"I've never encountered it before, so I don't know its name, but it was probably a demon-type monster…"

"They call it a Greater Demon, apparently," Sara interjected. She seemed to have gathered information the previous day. She gave a thumbs-up to a surprised Skallda.

"After all, it's a monster that not only resists spells like *Katino* and *Madalto,* but also casts level 5 magic spells back at you. I did a little research and was able to identify the species. Just as I suspected, it's a high-ranking demon from the underworld."

"I see, it's no surprise that you couldn't handle that monster," the old elf nodded. "That species has an abnormally high resistance to

spells, so even if you were to cast the *Tiltowait* spell, it would be almost completely ineffective. Its entire body is covered in a hard, armored hide with a better armor class than a poor warrior's. It would be difficult to defeat, no matter how much you wield the Sword of Kasinart. To defeat it for sure…"

"You mean the Cursed Sword Muramasa?" Skallda asked for confirmation. In his eyes was the sharp glint characteristic of one who pursues the martial arts.

The Cursed Sword Muramasa, also known as the Muramasa Blade, was a legendary enchanted sword said to possess destructive power far exceeding even the best existing sword, the Sword of Kasinart. Just like the osafune Japanese sword that Skallda had seen at the samurai master's training hall, it was one of a few brought from a distant land long ago. As its nickname, "cursed sword," suggested, it was a terrible blade that brought death to its enemies and madness to its wielder.

The word "madness" might suggest it was a cursed item, but that was not the case. The ominous legend had simply arisen because its past owners, fascinated by its sharpness, had committed a series of bloody acts. It was also called a sword that reflected the wielder's heart, and the belief that anyone with an evil heart who took hold of it would be ruined was likely born from this bloody history.

Even a person with no combat experience could wield it and exert enough power to kill a giant in a single blow. It was a sword that everyone longed to possess.

The last owner of the Muramasa was the legendary strongman Nacklaave. He was a man who stood out from even the notoriously fearsome warriors of Trebor's Royal Guard, a group famous for their ability to defeat a thousand men.

Nacklaave had served as Trebor's right-hand man since the Royal Guard was first organized. Despite being a samurai, he had embraced the evil creed, making him a typical killer who lacked spiritual discipline. He was extremely violent and bloodthirsty by nature. It was even said that he couldn't calm down until he had killed at least one person with his sword.

The stories about Nacklaave were legendary. Rumors circulated that he had taken no fewer than 100 heads in a single battle. It was also said that in a war against a certain nation that was defeated by

Trebor, he beheaded every last one of the surrendering nobles and royalty. He had also single-handedly stormed the enemy's main camp and killed the king and his entire retinue. His feats of bravery were superhuman and unparalleled in history.

However, he was not gifted when it came to tactics. He had commanded a 100-man team to vanquish Werdna, but he had repeatedly triggered traps throughout the labyrinth. The ever-elusive vampire army had also continuously picked off his comrades. In the end, he beheaded the few survivors deep within the labyrinth and then died himself.

And so, the Muramasa disappeared into the darkness. It was now said to be in the hands of a bandit lurking in the labyrinth, or that it had been swallowed by a hungry fire dragon, but no one knew for certain. There was also a tale that Nacklaave's corpse had been resurrected by the sword's eerie power and was now roaming the labyrinth, seeking blood, which was why the sword had never been found.

"Yes. That sword—no, it's a katana. With it, you could cut through the skin of a demon as easily as you could slash a slime. But it's no use if it's not within your reach," the elf said, shaking his head.

"Can't it be found?" Skallda asked.

"It's unlikely to be found. If it's still somewhere deep in the labyrinth—a katana that has absorbed the blood and resentments of so many people—a truly evil spirit must have attached itself to it, making it a genuine cursed sword. If by some chance you were to find it, taking hold of it would mean your own ruin."

"---"

"By the way, can I talk to you, Skallda?" Gadi, who had been silent until now, spoke for the first time.

"Ah, I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"Something feels off. About what just happened."

"You mean me and Vulcan?" Skallda asked, thinking to himself that biting his lip seemed to have become a habit whenever he thought of something unpleasant.

"Yeah. Though it's mostly about Vulcan."

"In what way?" Sara leaned forward, circling around in front of Skallda to ask.

"I didn't sense any killing intent. Even though he was about to cast such a flamboyant spell, there was none of the presence that you transmit so strongly, Skallda."

She furrowed her brow slightly. "Didn't you feel the same way, Sara?"

"I'm a wizard. I'm not as sensitive to killing intent as you guys are. Still, Skallda's killing intent sent a shiver down my spine."

Maintaining her posture, Sara tilted her head and looked up at Skallda. "You could try to be a little more restrained in front of a lady."

"Not in that situation—killing intent, you say? That is strange."

At that moment, the air between them had been incredibly tense. But now that he thought about it, Skallda realized his "aura" had been reflected back at him by Vulcan as if by a mirror. Vulcan himself hadn't emitted any killing intent.

"Who is Vulcan?" the old elf asked, requesting an explanation for a name he hadn't heard before.

"You don't know him, do you?" Sara responded before Skallda could. "He's a wizard who has apparently mastered all spells, but I don't remember him. I looked him up, but his name isn't on the registry."

"Oh. All spells, you say?"

The elf put on his monocle, leaned forward, and looked intrigued. Around that same time…

A lone figure was moving stealthily a few blocks away from the elf's room.

Being in the dark zone, there was, of course, no way to see its form. But that wasn't all. Though it was moving at a considerable speed, there was no sound of feet scuffing against the stone floor, or even the rustle of robes.

Without a visible form and without sound, it would have been impossible for anyone to even know if they had passed this figure. Its footsteps were like a lukewarm breeze blowing through the dark

night.

It was Vulcan.

For some strange reason, none of Skallda's party could sense his presence. In the dark zone, which absorbed all light, only a bat using sound echoes or a vampire with the same ability would be able to confirm Vulcan's location.

He took advantage of this. As soon as Skallda entered the elf's room, he left the group, unnoticed by the remaining Jaaba and Belyal.

It was an inexplicable action. Even if he had mastered all spells, it was unthinkable for a wizard, the weakest of all the classes in terms of strength and stamina, to wander around alone. If a monster were to get the jump on him, the light fabric of his robe would be easily pierced by claws, fangs, or swords. He was in danger of getting seriously wounded even on the first basement floor.

But Vulcan didn't seem to care and moved as if gliding.

He suddenly stopped so abruptly that one might not have even noticed. He was more than ten blocks away from where Jaaba and the others were waiting. In the labyrinth, and especially in the dark zone, such a distance meant his cries for help would never reach them.

He slowly spread his arms and began to chant a spell in a low voice.

"*Teiru buromu mahama mahama—baama zaha gaaraana…Bamorisu!*"

It was a variation of the darkness spell *Morisu* . The spell temporarily dispelled darkness with the counter-chant "ba", but since its duration was much shorter than a priest's *Milwa* spell, hardly anyone learned it.

However, since both spells were sourced from darkness, it also worked in the dark zone. The darkness around Vulcan was neutralized in a sphere about two meters in diameter.

In front of Vulcan's eyes, a white haze was rapidly solidifying. In an instant, it condensed into a vague human shape.

The face that finally formed snapped its eyes open wide.

"You fool!"

A great roar of fury, loud enough to shatter one's skull, rang out.

Scene 9. Dark Zone 3

That was a furious roar, like the peal of thunder. Vulcan's body shuddered as if struck by a whip.

The white figure was not a physical entity. It was an ethereal projection, a phantom created from the life energy leaking from the dead, and a form of telepathic communication—a remote conversation that can be held by those with a certain level of magical power. The life energy is constantly overflowing in this labyrinth, where many people die, so there is no shortage of it to create such illusions.

The strong spiritual energy made the phantom eerily vivid, but the thick stone walls seemed to block the transmitted thoughts, leaving the image out of focus and blurred. Because of this, the face looked both young and like a shriveled mummy. All that was certain was that it was a man.

The angry voice continued.

"You cast a spell of *Tiltowait* for such a foolish reason! Was your mission to annihilate them? You great fool!"

"You were watching..." Vulcan replied, placing his right arm over his chest.

"All actions in those shallow levels are displayed on the crystal ball. Including where you sowed the seeds of pointless conflict."

He was likely talking about how Vulcan incinerated the orcs.

"But there was no need at all to let them get away..."

"Enough with the excuses. I will not tolerate any more of your selfish actions. Engrave this on your heart."

"Yes." Vulcan bowed his head deeply.

Vulcan, a spellcaster skilled enough to command *Tiltowait* and possessing the courage to stand his ground against Skallda, seemed utterly terrified of this individual.

"As we descend to the lower levels, we will lose contact, but never forget your mission. Your objective is—what's wrong?"

Seeing Vulcan brace himself, the white phantom flickered violently.

"It seems to be an enemy. Two thieves. What should I do?"

"Do as you please. Take this opportunity to vent your frustration. There is more to be said, but our conversation is over. I await good news."

With that, the image instantly lost its form and scattered into a white mist, just as it had appeared.

"Vent my frustration, you say... How very kind."

A look of pleasure rose in Vulcan's eyes. It was the gaze of a predator licking its lips before its prey.

Just as he had expected, two thieves appeared.

They were likely the ruined remnants of adventurers who, driven mad by the stagnant miasma of the labyrinth, had become permanent dwellers. They were Bushwhackers, a group of strong individuals who lurked on the first basement level. They were moderately well-armed with a metal shield and a dagger.

At first, the two seemed taken aback by the open space in the dark zone, but they quickly noticed Vulcan.

"Looks like we're in luck. Just one wizard here," one of the thieves said, turning his bearded face to his partner.

The other thief, who was quite muscular for a thief, never took his eyes off Vulcan as he slowly edged around to his back. He seemed to be a man of considerable experience.

"Hey, you there," the man in the back said in a thick voice. "If you don't want to die, leave all your money behind. A lone wizard can't fight, can he?"

Vulcan remained silent, saying nothing.

"Don't worry, walking around alone like you're on a roll is something newcomers often do. There's no shame in it. Just hand over the money and we'll let you go. What good is money to a wizard anyway?"

The bearded man wore a triumphant expression. "We don't mind a fight, you know."

The Bushwhackers thought Vulcan was just a newcomer who had gotten lost in the dark zone alone. Also, since they had him

cornered, they didn't have to worry about a simultaneous spell attack. They seemed to think they would win no matter what if it came down to a fight.

At that moment, the spell's effect was lost. The deep darkness instantly filled the area.

"What?!"

As the two were thrown into disarray by the sudden loss of vision, Vulcan's whispering voice reached their ears.

"You two are a little disappointing, but that's fine. Do your best to fight for your lives. You'll die either way..." The final words were mixed with a low chuckle and were hard to make out, but a tremendous chill ran through their bodies.

"*Hii—*" The bearded man choked back a scream in his throat.

That was the last sound he made in this world.

Clang.

Splat.

The muscular man heard the sound of something metallic falling to the floor, followed by the sound of a heavy, liquid-filled object hitting it.

"H-hey, what happened?" The man strained his ears, desperately fighting off a sense of foreboding. But still, there was no response.

"Your partner is dead. Now it's just you." Vulcan's voice echoed, chillingly close.

"*Hyaaah!*" The man shrieked and swung the dagger in his hand. But the blade only cut through the air.

"Yes. It wouldn't be fun otherwise. Try harder." From the space where the sword should have been slicing, Vulcan whispered with what sounded like great amusement.

"*Nngggh!*" The man, unable to bear the tension of death, let out a meaningless cry and tried to run blindly.

Blish!

There was the sound of a large amount of liquid splattering.

"There was no resistance. I am disappointed..." Amidst Vulcan's murmur, a nauseating stench filled the air.

It was the smell of blood.

"He's making us wait, isn't he? Is he getting some tea inside—no, he's not that kind of geezer."

Jaba, leaning against the outer wall of the old elf's room, muttered to himself. A significant amount of time had passed since Skallda and the others entered the room. Including the time spent on the recent orc incident, other adventurers would soon be entering the dark zone as well.

"This is not worth getting up at the crack of dawn to leave the inn for," Jaba complained.

"Tired of waiting?" Belial asked.

"I'm sick of it. Just holding my breath in a dark zone like this. It's more tiring than disarming a treasure chest trap."

"You're still as impatient as ever. The core of you hasn't changed even after becoming a ninja."

"Heh. Well, compared to those who've reclassed, I've kind of cheated. I forgot to ask Skallda last night, but class change involves some crazy training, doesn't it?"

"I've never considered a job other than being a priest, so I don't know the specifics, but for example, if you were to change from a thief to a warrior..."

"No one's that stupid," Jaba cut in immediately.

"It's an example. Just listen quietly. So, if you were to change jobs, the muscles a thief and a warrior use are completely different. A thief hardly needs any muscle strength, does he?"

"Well, that's true. If I force myself to hold a heavy weapon, my hand gets messed up quickly. And when that happens, my sense for disarming traps gets dull."

"Hmm. It seems a class change sacrifices that sense to rapidly build the muscle strength a warrior needs. Of course, this takes a toll in various ways. Your reflexes, intelligence, five senses, and even your luck can all drop. Skallda must have suffered a lot today because of that."

"Then I'm pretty lucky. Thanks to that Dagger of Thieves."

"So it seems. But are there any changes to your body? You're not a thief anymore, so it wouldn't be strange for there to be a difference."

"Now that you mention it," Jaba's voice had a slight note of unease. "The feeling in my fingertips isn't quite right. I haven't opened a treasure chest yet, so I can't be sure, but it feels like I'm wearing a thin glove."

"Oh?"

"Well, I guess it's just because I'm not used to the ninja class yet."

Normally, a class change to a ninja is only permitted for those who follow the tenets of Evil. It was no surprise that Jaba, a Neutral thief, knew little about being a ninja and didn't realize that his trap-disarming ability was now inferior to a thief's. He had simply heard that he could have the same abilities as a thief while also having high combat abilities, and he used the transformative power of the Dagger of Thieves to enhance his party's fighting power.

Just as Belial was about to ask more about it, he heard the door open and the voices of Skallda and the others. Their conversation with the old elf seemed to have ended.

"You're late," Jaba said, sounding displeased.

"My apologies. The conversation went on for a while," Skallda replied. "Let's head for the elevator right away. Everyone's here, right?"

"Presumably. Vulcan...?" Belial called out, having noticed that he hadn't spoken at all during the conversation with Jaba.

"...I'm here," came the slightly delayed response.

"Alright, let's go."

At Skallda's command, the group left the front of the elf's room.

No one had noticed that Vulcan had disappeared into the eternal darkness...

Scene 10: Elevator

A colossal vertical pit gaped open in the floor before Skallda and his party. It was a hole that had been bored straight down to the fourth subterranean level.

Floating above it was a cage-like box, large enough to comfortably hold a party of six heavy-armored warriors. Its floor and ceiling were a single, solid piece, and the space between them was supported by thick iron trusses.

This was no ordinary cage. It was an immense structure, so vast that it could only truly serve as a prison for a creature the size of a Fire Dragon. This was the magical elevator that the Werdna Extermination Squad had installed with the help of powerful arcane spells.

It was a remarkably well-crafted magical device, built to utilize rocks imbued with mutually repelling magnetic forces, allowing even weak, long-lasting spells to generate enough power for reliable ascent and descent. By using it, the long journey to the fourth subterranean level, which would otherwise take an immense amount of time via the stairs, could be completed in an instant.

Despite its inconvenient location on the edge of the Dark Zone, it was a crucial point for conquering the labyrinth, used daily by all parties of intermediate-level adventurers and above.

Skallda and his companions had used this path countless times.

The six of them entered the area with their front and back lines grouped together. Jaba, Gadi, and Skallda walked almost shoulder to shoulder.

Just as Jaba, who was in the lead, was about to step into the elevator, Gadi suddenly grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"Watch out!"

Jaba, abruptly yanked back and leaning against Gadi, wore a look of confusion. Just then, something like a dull, gleaming dagger whizzed past his side from behind with terrifying speed.

Clang!

It flew into the elevator, struck the iron trusses on the opposite side,

and ricocheted away. Spinning, it traced a gentle arc over the heads of Skallda's party and returned in the direction from which it came.

"!"

Behind them was the border of the Dark Zone they had just passed through. The line between the darkness of the Dark Zone and the light-filled space was like a wall of jet-black lacquer.

When Skallda and his companions turned, what they saw was an arm reaching out from that black wall. The rebounding dagger was drawn to the arm as if being sucked in.

A shuriken!

Grasped in the reverse grip of the arm protruding from the wall, the object was a double-edged dagger with a blade just under twenty centimeters long. The blade was an extremely elongated isosceles triangle, narrowing into a hilt wrapped in leather cord. At the top of the hilt was a five-centimeter iron ring, likely for attaching a rope or chain. It was a type of shuriken also known as a kunai.

The shuriken is a unique weapon, created and handed down exclusively for ninjas. While similar in size and weight to a wizard's dagger, its blade is incomparably harder and sharper.

The ninja class itself is the most specialized of all front-line classes —such as warriors, samurai, or lords. It is said to be impossible to become a ninja from the start, no matter how gifted one is. Instead, one can only be allowed to class change after they have honed their mind, body, and skills in another profession to their absolute limit.

The training required for a class change is a brutal series of physical modifications. The unique breathing techniques taught during this time have the singular effect of subtly strengthening muscle mass just by being performed. The body that emerges from this process is nothing short of a weapon designed for slaughter. In fact, its combat ability is at its peak when the ninja is unarmed. They can sever an opponent's neck with a mere hand chop.

Because of their inhuman abilities, ninja is a class only accessible to those who follow the precepts of Evil.

And it is with the strange weapon known as the shuriken that a ninja can most efficiently utilize their power. Just as a warrior slashes an enemy with strength and a samurai with "ki," a ninja

slashes with speed. By using a light, sharp shuriken, they can inflict far greater damage than by using a powerful longsword.

Nowadays, the method for crafting these shuriken is known by only a very few. For a ninja, it is a weapon equivalent to the samurai's katana.

Among the few ninjas in Trebor's Fortress, only one possessed this particular weapon.

"What do you want, Ha-Kim?" Skallda shouted toward the arm in the Dark Zone.

"Heh heh... just a little greeting," a raspy, hard-to-understand voice emerged from the darkness. Slowly, an entire body followed the arm, emerging from the dark wall.

The figure that appeared was a small, child-like man clad in top-grade steel armor known as the Armor of Evil. He had a noticeable hunch, but even so, he was only about half the height of Skallda, who had the standard physique of a warrior.

Like many ninjas, his face was covered by a cloth hood. The skin visible from the hood was a sickly yellow, and his narrow, slanted eyes had frighteningly tiny pupils.

His arms, however, were disproportionately long and powerful. In arm strength alone, he was no match for the giant Gadi. Because of this, his overall appearance was that of a small gorilla.

The man called Ha-Kim narrowed his already thin eyes and took a couple of steps forward with unexpected speed.

"Well, Jaba. I hear you became a ninja, too. And you surpassed me, heh heh..."

His manner of speech was irritating. The intentionally suppressed, raspy voice only heightened the feeling of unease.

Ha-Kim—a hobbit who had drifted in from the east about a year and a half ago. Although he was an uncommon warrior for a hobbit when he arrived, he immediately went to a ninja training ground—a rare sight on a global scale—and had been a seasoned ninja ever since, accumulating real-world experience. He was currently certified as Level 12 and was considered the most skilled ninja in the fortress city after Jaba.

"Ninja Killer" was Ha-Kim's moniker. The story behind it was beyond imagination: he had murdered countless ninjas within the labyrinth simply to steal their shuriken.

Most ninjas in the labyrinth were imposters who had only learned the technique of severing heads. They were no match for a ninja like Ha-Kim, who had undergone formal training. Yet, the risk of a head-chopping attack was high, and no one but this man willingly engaged with them.

In truth, he had been killed by having his head cut off numerous times, but each time, he returned from the Temple of Cant thanks to a vitality and streak of bad luck that were abnormal for a hobbit.

He was an unsettling man.

The mouth hidden by his hood moved, and the raspy voice began to flow again.

"By the way... would you mind if my group and I used that elevator first? We're in a bit of a hurry, heh heh."

The moment he said, "my group," the darkness behind Ha-Kim seemed to swell, as if on cue.

No, it wasn't the darkness. A burly warrior, covered from head to toe in matte black armor, had emerged from the Dark Zone. He was about Skallda's height, but his bulk was in a completely different league. His total mass seemed to exceed Gadi's. What was even more astonishing was that this warrior was a Dwarf. He was one and a half times the size of a normal dwarf.

The warrior stepped right behind Ha-Kim and flipped up the visor of his equally black helmet. A heavily scarred face with skin as dark as if smeared with soot was revealed. His half-closed eyes scanned all of Skallda's party without any emotion. Only when his gaze fell upon Gadi did a faint, sharp glint appear in them.

"Gogleg..." Gadi whispered the man's name.

The warrior—Gogleg—revealed a set of astonishingly white teeth and twisted his mouth into a sneer.

"Ha-Kim, you bastard! You try to kill someone, and then you ask us to let you go first! You're really testing our patience!"

Jaba, who had been in a momentary state of shock over the

shuriken that would have plunged into his head had Gadi not pulled him back, finally regained his composure and tried to lunge at Ha-Kim. Skallda stopped him with an outstretched arm.

"My, my, it seems we can't settle this peacefully. It's your fault, Ha-Kim."

Another voice rang out. At the same time, a third man appeared.

He was wearing a crimson robe and chain mail made of white metal. It was a rare item called Armor of Freon.

He was a human cleric in his mid-twenties. A handsome young man with golden hair slicked back. However, a smirk plastered on his mouth turned what would have been a noble face into a vulgar one. His eyes, though intelligent, exuded a certain cunning.

Ha-Kim turned his upper body to look at the young man and simply let out a low, guttural "heh heh."

Following him, three more people entered the area.

Scene 11. Evil Party

Following the young priest was a human girl with long red hair tied in a bun at the back of her head. She looked about fifteen or sixteen, the youngest among the adventurers. Despite her youthful face, her piercing brown eyes showed a feisty personality. She was a different type of beautiful girl from the seemingly gentle Sara.

Like Jaba from the day before, the girl wore light, flexible leather armor and had a dagger at her waist. From her attire, it was clear she was a thief, the second most common female adventurer after a magician.

With her mouth set in a firm line, the girl glared at Jaba.

The remaining two were gnome magicians, a head shorter than the hobbit Ha-Kim. They were identical, like mirror images, except that one's robe was a deep blue and the other's was green. They were a creepy pair of twins, constantly whispering to each other and occasionally letting out snickering laughs.

The two parties faced each other in front of the elevator. On one side, Skallda's Good party, boasting the highest skill level in the fortress. On the other, Ha-Kim's Evil party, a group of level 12 members. They were the strongest units of Good and Evil, rivals to each other.

After a brief silence, the priest in red—Alheim—bowed with elaborate courtesy.

"My apologies for this rudeness. But then, the Good commandments don't hold grudges over such things, do they? Right, Skallda, Belial?"

His tone was half-provocative. Belial spoke before a scowling Skallda could.

"You don't even know how to apologize. You're no different from some brat on the street. Your mind hasn't grown at all since your days of training. Or does following the commandments of Evil make you stupid, Alheim?"

The smile on Alheim's face vanished instantly.

"...My, you've gotten quite talkative with age. If you had the skills

to back it up, you could have resurrected Silver without him lost, couldn't you?"

The news of Silver's loss had apparently already spread among the adventurers. Seeing Belial's expression stiffen, the twin magician siblings, Sandra and Rudra, let out a nasty chuckle. These twin gnomes were a dangerous lot, far more than their appearance suggested. They were known to suddenly cast spells while whispering, and along with Ha-Kim, they were among the most disliked adventurers.

"Speaking of which, I haven't offered my condolences for Silver yet. What a pity. The fate of those who aren't blessed with good companions is especially tragic."

Seeing Belial clench his teeth at the mention of a party member's loss, the greatest humiliation for a priest, Alheim's mouth curled into a smile again.

This young priest had once been a Good priest who trained with Belial at a temple not far from the lands of Trebor. He was Belial's disciple and was expected to have a promising future due to his charismatic, handsome looks and his rare talent as a priest for a human. However, at some point, he had turned to Evil.

After that, he wandered and mastered various spells from different regions. Just three months ago, he came to this fortress as a level 11 priest.

"If you had just left it to me, I could have resurrected him beautifully—"

"If that's all you have to say, we'll be going."

Skallda, who couldn't bear the persistent insults against Belial, interrupted. "And the one who caused Silver's loss was a greedy monk from the Canto Temple. There's no reason to listen to a guy who hasn't even reached master level."

Alheim snorted and sneered.

"I'll be a master by the end of the day. That's why I'm in such a hurry."

"And so you want us to step aside? I'm sorry, but we don't have time to listen to your gibberish. You'll just have to wait for the elevator to come up."

"What? Alheim. There's no way to settle this peacefully, hehehe... Skallda, we're not afraid of using force."

Ha-Kim stared at Skallda.

"Are you willing to kill over a simple turn?"

"I heard you just changed jobs, Skallda. Heh heh."

It seemed this man was trying to intimidate them, taking into account Silver's loss and the drop in the party's overall strength due to Skallda's job change. However, it wasn't just an empty threat. He exuded a sense of tension that suggested he would attack at any moment. Ha-Kim was the kind of man who would do something like that without hesitation. The constantly whispering Sandra and Rudra in the back couldn't be trusted either.

Fighting another party in a dungeon was something everyone avoided, even with the conflict between Good and Evil, as it was simply too dangerous. Unless there was a significant skill difference, both sides would suffer serious injuries.

It was clear that a confrontation between these two parties would be far more terrifying than the previous conflict between Skallda and Vulcan.

"Besides, I heard you left your inn at dawn. For a party in a hurry, you sure took your time getting here."

Skallda remained silent at Alheim's question. He couldn't possibly say the cause was his and Vulcan's quarrel.

At that moment, the female thief finally spoke. Rasha, the only neutral and lawless member in the Evil party.

"I don't want to fight with Jaba and the others."

Alheim clicked his tongue quietly. His ally had spoken up at a critical moment.

"Couldn't we have gone down already while we've been arguing? Not just Ha-Kim, but you too, Alheim, are being so needlessly aggressive. Let's settle this peacefully, quickly."

Her tone was resolute. Surrounded by an unsettling group, she still made her opinions clear.

Ha-Kim and Alheim exchanged looks, seeming a little troubled.

Alheim immediately whispered to Rasha, so Skallda and the others couldn't hear.

"We have to overtake them."

Rasha's eyebrows furrowed in suspicion.

"We need to hold them up for a bit. Jaba won't be harmed, so don't interfere. As long as he's safe, that's enough for you, isn't it?"

Rasha looked slightly defiant at Alheim's words, but realizing Ha-Kim and Alheim had a plan, she reluctantly fell silent.

"So, can we go now?"

Sara, who had been listening quietly all this time, spoke up. "I'm tired of waiting. From what I've heard, it's nothing but slander and unreasonable threats. We're not getting anything out of this."

"Oh," Alheim said, dramatically spreading his arms.

"Well, well, Sara, as beautiful as ever. When I saw you whining at the tavern entrance, I thought you'd be nursing a terrible hangover today."

Sara put a hand over her mouth in a surprised gesture.

"I was thinking of casting a Ratmouth spell on you if we met. It seems Belial has already drained the alcohol from you. By the way..."

He smirked slyly. "As we were heading from the inn to the city gates, a city clerk was putting up a sign. It seems an offender who cast a spell at a tavern last night is being sentenced to three days of forced labor."

Three days of forced labor?!

Skallda and the others' eyes widened. Sara, in particular, was so shocked she nearly dropped her staff.

Forced labor was a punishment that could not be refused as long as one lived in the fortress city of Trebor.

The practice began because of the increase in minor crimes like theft, assault, and casting spells. As many adventurers—including criminals—came to the city to challenge Werdna's Labyrinth, officials couldn't simply imprison them, as that would hinder the

reclamation of the amulet. And they couldn't just let them go free, either. The solution they came up with was to subject them to labor so harsh that they would never even think of committing another crime. This labor involved reclaiming the wasteland behind the training grounds from sunrise to sunset with only one short break. It was said that even a mighty warrior would curse their own actions after just one day. If they refused, they would have to leave the city, so it was a punishment adventurers had no choice but to accept.

Three days of forced labor was something the frail female magician Sara could never endure.

"It seems no one saw the face of the one who cast the spell, so witnesses are asked to report. Now, what to do?"

Alheim smiled broadly, watching Sara's reaction.

Sara was trying to maintain her composure, but her face was pale. Her naturally fair skin was even whiter. It was rare for the usually cool and collected Sara to be this flustered.

Alheim knew it was Sara who had cast the spell and was blatantly trying to make a deal. He was threatening not to report her if they let them go first.

However, Alheim's story might have been a complete lie. Skallda and the others had no way to confirm if a sign had been put up after they passed. But for a simple turn on the elevator, no threat, even a bluff, could have been more effective. Alheim was devilishly clever when it came to this kind of bargaining.

"What a dirty trick for a priest."

Jaba spat in disgust. "That's why I hate your kind. You'll do anything for your own gain."

"That's why you'll never defeat Werdna," Rasha retorted sharply.

"What did you say?"

"What's it to you?"

"Enough," Alheim said, stepping between the two who were glaring at each other. "You need to decide quickly, Skallda."

"It's fine, Skallda," Sara said, her face still drained of color as she turned. "We don't need to give in to this threat. Let's just go."

"No."

Skallda placed a hand on Sara's shoulder. He then stepped forward, a single pace ahead of the three in the rear. The distance between him and Ha-Kim at the front of the Evil party was about three and a half steps.

"We'll let you go first. I don't know what you're plotting, but there's no point in being stubborn over something like this."

He gave Alheim a sharp look. "In return—"

"It would be crude to say more. Of course, I don't know who used the spell. Now then, if you'll excuse us. We can't accept your kindness if you're blocking the entrance."

Skallda and the others, looking deeply annoyed, stepped aside a few paces. Seeing this, Ha-Kim let out a raspy laugh.

"Good, you're being reasonable. We'll take your offer without hesitation."

At that moment, Ha-Kim's body moved with the speed of a lizard.

Hmm?!

A killing intent reached for Skallda. But his body's reaction was slower than expected.

By the time Skallda reacted, a shuriken in Ha-Kim's hand was at his throat.

In the blink of an eye, Ha-Kim had closed the distance.

"Heh heh..."

Looking up at Skallda from close-up, Ha-Kim slowly lowered the shuriken. He then slid sideways.

"A guy who just changed jobs isn't quite in sync with his body, huh? I could easily lop your head off right now, Skallda."

Ha-Kim squinted, looking pleased. "Do your best. I'll pray that you get back in shape soon. Heh heh."

"That's very kind of you," Skallda muttered, looking grim. It was understandable to be outmatched by a level 12 ninja, but losing to this man still infuriated him.

"Get going, you monkey bastard!" Jaba yelled.

Ha-Kim left a cackling laugh behind as he nimbly leaped into the elevator.

The hulking Gogleg followed, his pitch-black armor clanking as he moved.

"Gadi."

Gogleg, for the first time, spoke as he passed. His voice was deep and resonant.

"What?"

Gadi's eyes followed Gogleg.

"I'll catch up today."

Before he could finish, the black figure disappeared into the elevator entrance.

"I'm looking forward to it," Gadi replied quietly, his gaze shifting to the darkness of the Dark Zone, the opposite direction of the elevator.

After Gogleg was fully inside, the remaining four headed for the elevator.

"Hey, Rasha."

Jaba called out to Rasha as she was about to pass, walking beside Alheim.

"What?"

"How long are you going to hang out with these guys?"

"Who knows. At least it's none of your business."

Rasha stopped and gave him a sharp look. Behind her, Alheim was smirking and watching the exchange.

"I'm just worried about you. These guys use terrible methods. Listen, you should cut ties with them soon."

Anger flashed in Rasha's eyes.

"I don't need you to worry about me now. I'll do things my way. Stop meddling; you're not even my party member."

With that, Rasha walked to the elevator.

"Wait."

Jaba tried to follow, but Alheim blocked his way.

"Rasha has made her feelings clear. There's no point in saying anything more. Besides, we're in a hurry. If you want to have a chat, do it after we've returned to the city."

He smiled, and then, with Sandra and Rudra still snickering behind him, he got into the elevator.

"Hmph, what a bunch of despicable people. I can't understand what Rasha sees in them, hanging out with guys like that," Jaba muttered to himself.

Thump.

The rock-hewn elevator, carrying the Evil party, began to descend. This elevator was controlled by pressing button-like protrusions on the metal pillars that supported the floor and ceiling, which adjusted magical buoyancy to move to the desired level. The level Ha-Kim and his party designated was, of course, the fourth basement level.

"Oh, I forgot to greet the new member."

Ha-Kim's voice echoed from the elevator as it descended, his head already out of sight. "You in the black. Too bad, but you won't earn anything today by staying with them. Heh heh heh heh..."

"What do you mean, Ha-Kim?"

When Skallda asked the question, the elevator had already disappeared into the darkness, and only Ha-Kim's raspy laugh reverberated.

Scene 12. Middle Floor

An unsettling presence filled the air.

It was a dark subterranean passage. In the space illuminated by the faint light of a small lamp, there wasn't a single trace of a living creature.

And yet, something was clearly there. Something without a physical form—the souls of adventurers who had fallen in the middle of their quests and met their end without being resurrected, were drifting in a great mass.

If you listened closely, you could almost hear the low groans of the deceased, layer upon layer, filled with their regrets.

This was the fourth level of Werdna's Labyrinth.

In this labyrinth, where a multitude of monsters were artificially placed by magic, adventurers were forced into much more brutal battles than anywhere else. Consequently, talented individuals could reach master level—a feat that normally took over a decade of training—in just about two years. It was the perfect place for those who wanted to quickly increase their skills.

However, the unending, life-or-death battles against ferocious beasts also created many dropouts.

And among all the levels, the most deaths were said to have occurred on this fourth subterranean floor.

The monsters inhabiting the levels above were small humanoids like orcs and kobolds, along with rogue adventurers who hadn't trained much, or animals that had become slightly more vicious due to the influence of magic. The terrifying undead monsters, which drew their energy from wicked magical power, were at most just moving, rotting corpses.

But on the fourth level, the ecosystem of the monsters underwent a complete change.

The main inhabitants were lycanthropes—monsters with the intelligence of humans and the bodies of beasts—and ogres, hulking creatures with immense physical strength. And there were gigantic insects, rarely seen in this region: huge spiders with powerful

venom, boring beetles that feasted on human corpses, and fire-breathing dragonflies were all lying in wait for prey on this floor. The huge spiders, in particular, seemed to have found perfect breeding conditions and always moved in large groups.

In addition, medium-sized gas dragons that exhaled an instant-acting poisonous breath, and shadow-like undead monsters called shades that were almost incorporeal, also appeared frequently. The strength of the monsters had increased by a huge margin.

It was a place where only those with both luck and skill could survive.

"I hate this place, every time I come here," muttered Jaba in a low voice as he stepped off the elevator. "I always feel like someone's staring at me. And the thought that the 'someone' is the souls of those who couldn't find peace... that's a chilling thought."

The party, led by Skallda, had finally reached the elevator room on the fourth subterranean floor.

They were a few minutes behind Ha-Kim and his evil party, which, given their abilities, meant a considerable amount of time had passed since they entered the labyrinth at dawn.

Following Jaba, everyone stepped off the elevator.

The elevator room on this floor was located almost at the center of a single passage that extended north and south. The path in front of them, to the south, was a deep darkness where the lamp's faint light couldn't reach. Further ahead was the second elevator that descended to the ninth subterranean floor.

The northern side was blocked by a heavy door, and there was no sign of monsters lurking there.

If they didn't want to fall further behind Ha-Kim's party, they should have moved south immediately. Since Ha-Kim and his group had just passed through, any monsters in their way would likely have been turned into corpses. If they were lucky enough not to encounter any enemies, they had a good chance of catching up.

However, Skallda hesitated. The words Ha-Kim had left behind as he went down the elevator were stuck in his mind.

There's no doubt that he and Alheim have something planned. Otherwise, they wouldn't have tried so persistently to get ahead of us.

The situation was too precarious to let their guard down. Knowing Alheim, who was skilled in schemes, it was highly likely he had set a trap to hinder Skallda's party. It was surprising that the elevator itself hadn't been tampered with.

Almost two hundred adventurers were currently either trying to join top-class parties like Skallda's, or hoping that more powerful parties would be crushed by monsters. After all, if Trebor decided to stop recruiting new members for the Royal Guard as soon as someone defeated Werdna and retrieved the talisman, all the other adventurers' efforts would have been for nothing.

It was no surprise that Ha-Kim's party, currently in second place, would try to sabotage Skallda's group in order to take the lead.

"Aren't we going, Skallda?" Jaba asked impatiently.

"I have a bad feeling about it. Knowing Ha-Kim, he might have set a trap that will go off with just a single step."

"That's scary. I can't disarm traps that activate instantly."

"But we can't just stand here either. They're good at these kinds of bluffs, those guys."

"I'm sorry. If I hadn't used that spell last night, we wouldn't have had to let them go first," said Sara, unusually subdued. She was referring to Alheim's threat from before.

"It's not your fault. I was the one who let them go first. Besides, if his threat was real, it would have been three days of forced labor. I'd have a hard time sleeping knowing I let my female party member go through that."

"But—"

"Those idiots are to blame. I never thought that man could be so utterly shameless. It makes me want to cry just thinking that he's from the same school," Belial said with a furious tone. He was clearly agitated from the insult by Alheim.

"Things have gone to hell ever since Ha-Kim teamed up with that Alheim bastard. I don't know how Rasha can stand being with those people... wait, what is it?"

Jaba turned around and noticed that Gadi, Skallda, and Vulcan were all staring intently at the space behind him. He quickly turned

back around, but all he saw was the same dark passage.

"I don't see anything. I can feel that same unsettling presence, though."

"Be quiet and listen closely. I can hear it now too," Skallda said, his eyes focused.

"?"

As he was told, Jaba strained his ears and realized his hearing had become even sharper than before. He still didn't fully understand the full extent of the physical functions enhanced by the Dagger of Thieves. By simply concentrating his hearing, he felt he could pick up sounds from almost twice the distance.

A strange sound reached Jaba's ears.

Rustle, rustle.

It was the sound of dry objects rubbing against each other. It came from the darkness ahead, a layered sound that was almost constant, so he hadn't noticed it before.

What is that sound?

The moment Jaba thought this, he heard Vulcan's low, raspy voice.

"They're coming."

As if that were a signal, green points of light appeared in the darkness. Not just one or two. There were at least fifty of them. And in the darkness beyond, countless more glowing points could be seen. They were slowly approaching Skallda and his party.

Suddenly, two of the points of light darted quickly into the lamp's glow.

The source of the green light points were the pairs of compound eyes on the front of the one-meter-long, hairy creatures: huge spiders.

With their bristly, poisonous yellow and dull brown hair quivering, they moved their eight legs with an unbelievable, insect-like speed and charged at Jaba. But Jaba's sword was a fraction of a second faster, cleaving the huge spider's head. A strong stench and a reddish-black bodily fluid gushed from the cut, and the spider's corpse stopped moving, its legs twitching in a spasm.

Hiss.

Jaba exhaled the breath he had been holding.

"Are all those things those giant spiders? That's an insane number."

"One hundred... no, at least two hundred. It's probably all the adult spiders on this floor," Sara analyzed instantly.

Perhaps wary of the smell of their fallen comrade's blood, the swarm of green eyes momentarily stopped moving. But they soon started to approach even faster than before.

"I thought there was a strange smell mixed in," Gadi said, warily drawing his sword, Cassinart.

"Ha-Kim must have used some kind of lure."

"I see. They figured that even if it's just huge spiders, gathering this many of them would be a good way to stall us. Alheim must have been the one who thought of it."

Skallda also readied his sword.

At the same time, nearly twenty spiders, as if they were a single organism, rushed forward, their bodies rubbing against each other. They were a dense mass, like a giant amoeba, making a constant rustling sound.

It was a brilliant trap. They had taken advantage of the fact that the fourth subterranean floor was a nest for huge spiders, and scattered a lure that insects liked in the passage leading to the lower level's elevator.

Even for a party boasting immense fighting power, it was dangerous to face a swarm of monsters that used slow-acting poison as a weapon. The poisonous breath of gas dragons and poison giants was terrifying, but its effects only lasted while the breath was being exhaled and, while it sapped strength, it didn't have lasting consequences.

However, the poison transmitted by huge spiders, or the fangs and claws of capybaras on the upper levels and wyverns on the lower levels, would, if injected, gradually drain a person's vitality forever unless some action—a *Dispel Poison* spell or a potion—was taken. If they ran out of spells and couldn't be healed, certain death awaited them.

Of course, a high-ranking priest like Belial had no worries about running out of spells, as he had mastered not only the Latumofis spell to dispel poison, but also the *Madi* spell to instantly reverse all symptoms other than death—like paralysis and petrification—and even regenerate physical damage.

But breaking through such a large number of huge spiders would undoubtedly consume a lot of spells.

To those without magic, the spellcasters' power to create fire and cold from nothing seemed like an all-powerful ability, but in reality, it was not. The spells, which were divided into seven levels based on the intensity of the phenomena they caused, put a significant strain on the mental capacity of the caster each time they were used. In a subterranean exploration where a full rest was not possible, even the most experienced caster could only use each level of spell fewer than ten times a day.

The fourth level of priest spells, to which *Latumofis* belongs, also includes the *Maborific* spell, which creates an invisible protective barrier around the entire party for the duration of the exploration. Subtracting this, Belial would only have seven or eight uses left for healing. If he were to run out of spells at this level and then get poisoned, he would have to use his trump card, the sixth-level spell Madi, which was crucial for the extremely intense battles on the lower levels.

And even if they tried to break through using wizard spells, the *Tiltowait* spell, which had the largest area of effect, could only burn three to four spiders at once. Using powerful offensive spells recklessly against mere huge spiders would clearly lead to a crisis on the lowest floor later on.

This was a perfect trap, as it blocked the passage to the lower levels, which was optimal for gaining experience, and forced them to waste a great number of spells to get through. This was an inescapable trap, since Skallda's objective was to train themselves through real combat.

"Sara, Vulcan, use *Mahalito*! We'll retreat as soon as we deal with these," Skallda commanded quickly.

The advance party of huge spiders was already right in front of the party's eyes. Some of them bent their hairy legs, preparing to pounce on the vanguards like Jaba.

The next moment, the ground beneath the spiders' feet lit up in a vivid crimson. Then, a fierce vortex of flames erupted from it.

Vulcan's *Mahalito* had detonated.

Screeeech!

Half of the vanguard was engulfed in the burning flames. The dying screams of the carbonizing huge spiders echoed through the passage lit by the fire. The sickening smell of burning creatures filled the air.

Without a moment's delay, Sara's *Mahalito* attacked the remaining half. The area a few steps ahead of the three vanguards instantly became a fiery hell.

However, the heat from a *Mahalito* was not enough to guarantee the death of a monster of the huge spider's class. A few that were in a less-affected area of the flame survived, and charged out of the fire, their bodies still smoldering.

One of them disintegrated in mid-air as it leaped. Its half-carbonized exoskeleton scattered, soaring up like a cloud of smoke.

It was Gadi's blow. A single swing of his sword, delivered by his massive frame, had the power to easily turn a medium-sized monster into a heap of flesh.

Hiss.

Jaba let out another sharp breath. His sword moved at an unimaginable speed.

All of the spider's legs, which were trying to bite Jaba, were severed. The torso, which had lost its ability to move, rolled a bit further from its momentum and died. It was a lightning-fast maneuver.

The last one had taken the least damage from the fire. The huge spider tried to slip into Skallda's blind spot.

In Skallda's mind, the trajectory of the spider's "presence" flashed. His body followed that path.

Just before the spider reached him, Skallda dodged it and drove his sword straight through its body from below.

As the huge spider passed him, its back split open. Spilling bodily

fluid, the spider collapsed forward a few steps behind Skallda.

The effect of the flame in front of them finally subsided. Beyond the still-smoldering corpses of the spiders, a swarm of huge spiders, nearly ten times the number they had just defeated, writhed. A few beetles with dull-gleaming hard carapaces were mixed in, seemingly waiting for a chance to get their meal.

"We'll fall back before the next group attacks."

"But what do we do? The lure will last for at least four or five hours. Do we just wait without doing anything?" Belial asked.

"I have an idea. If it doesn't work, Vulcan will use Malar to teleport us directly down."

The party immediately retreated into the elevator. They saw the following huge spiders cautiously crossing over the corpses of their comrades.

"Damn it, there's no end to this. Those bastards," Jaba cursed Ha-Kim and his party.

"How are you going to get through that mountain of spiders, Skallda? If we push it, it's exactly what Alheim wants," Belial said, shifting his gaze from the spider swarm to Skallda.

"If it works, you'll be giving me a standing ovation. We're going to get rid of the lure in this passage."

"What?"

Everyone looked at Skallda, as if asking for a repeat. But the dry sound of the spiders grew even louder.

"Doesn't look like we have time for an explanation. Vulcan, can you use the *Molito* spell?"

"Of course," Vulcan replied instantly.

"Alright, Sara and Vulcan will alternate casting *Molito*. From close to far, aiming at the air. It'll scare the huge spiders while also burning the lure. Keep casting until you've used up all your level three spells!"

At Skallda's command, a fierce light shot over the heads of the huge spiders. The light chased the spiders deeper into the passage, scattering countless sparks. The blinding light instantly illuminated

the dark subterranean passage.

It was *Molito*, an electrical spell of the same third level as the wizard's *Mahalito*. It was a spell that was rarely used since it inflicted less damage on enemies than other spells, but its powerful flash had the effect of stunning all living creatures. And since it ignited impurities in the air, scattering sparks, it was the perfect spell for burning away the lure's components.

That Skallda, who was almost a novice when it came to magic, could give such an appropriate command was due to his basic knowledge of magic, which he had been forced to learn when he changed his class to a samurai, and his exceptional intuition in combat.

The air in the entire passage began to glow white as the scented components were burned away.

"To the upper level!"

With Skallda's shout, the elevator began to ascend. Hot air rushed in, but since they were already moving towards the third level, it wasn't too bad.

When the elevator stopped at the third subterranean floor, Jaba finally spoke.

"What was that? What just happened? I have no idea."

"I tried to think of a way to get through using only level three spells, which don't seem very useful on the lower levels. I'd say it was a success for a spur-of-the-moment plan. What do you think?"

"No, that was brilliant," Belial said, his eyes wide as he spread his hands. "With this, the passage will be back to normal in less than half an hour. You're nothing like the warrior you were yesterday."

"Even a wizard wouldn't have come up with that so easily," Sara added.

"We must have just been lucky. Half an hour... that'll make for a good break."

With that, Skallda closed his eyes quietly. It was the first moment of peace he had felt since becoming a samurai.

Act II

Scene 13. Temple of Cant

A humid, lukewarm air flowed along the narrow cobblestone alley, as if crawling. It wasn't hot, yet the skin was somehow slick with sweat.

It was noon, but the light was as dim as twilight. A thick cloud mass, like black smoke, covered the entire sky. The black clouds swirled and were blown along at a tremendous speed. A very strong air current seemed to be raging. The clouds moved as if time was progressing ten times faster than usual.

Occasionally, strong sunlight poured through gaps in the raging black clouds, blindingly illuminating the old townscape.

This was the residential district located north of the royal castle in the fortified city of Trebor. Simple, almost unadorned houses were crowded into a not-so-large area. The people living here were mainly spellcasters, monks, or lower-ranking members of the Trebor army—a not-so-wealthy class—so the townscape was extremely modest.

There were almost no single-story houses. The prevalence of houses with a newly added second story was a kind of destiny for a fortified city, where the limited land enclosed by the city walls had to be used efficiently as the city developed.

This district was particularly dense with buildings. Besides the main streets radiating from the royal castle in the city center, a complex network of alleys too narrow for a carriage was intertwined. Looking up to the south, the King's Tower of Trebor Castle, which seemed to pierce the heavens, floated in a sky that looked crushed by the overhanging houses.

Buried within this townscape stood a chapel with a high roof. It was conspicuously taller than the surrounding buildings. While not very wide, it seemed to have considerable depth.

A small plaza was in front of the chapel, and its entrance was elevated, reached by a fine stone staircase of about ten steps. A large, narrow, arched entrance door was thrown open, revealing a narrow passage that continued inward. In stark contrast to its worn exterior, a luxurious crimson carpet was laid out.

This was the main temple of a religious sect that specialized in magical resurrection, known as the Cant Temple. It was one of the city's important facilities, as most adventurers who lost their lives were brought here.

When a person died from something other than old age or illness, their corpse was susceptible to being possessed by spirits and the like. Therefore, adventurers who were brought back by their companions were transported to the Cant Temple by the guards at the castle gate as quickly as possible and placed where monsters could not approach. Then, as soon as their companions paid the appropriate donation, the resurrection spell was cast.

Although resurrection spells like Revival and Revive could also be performed by a priest, the success rate was only fifty percent, which was not reliable. So, most adventurers entrusted the resurrection of their companions to this temple. It was a terrifyingly one-sided transaction; the donation was exorbitant, and if the spell failed and the corpse turned to ash, there would be no refund whatsoever. Even so, life was irreplaceable.

The dark clouds above began to swirl even more violently. This change in weather was unbelievable, considering the sky had been clear that morning. In the small plaza, several Cant priests anxiously looked up at the dark sky.

"What strange clouds," said the youngest of the priests, a young Elf. "The sky is clear far above us, but only the lower layer is filled with those black clouds... And they're moving at a speed I've never seen before. What on earth are they?"

The other priests also looked at the clouds with uniform unease. The dark clouds swirling in the sky seemed to be circling the Cant Temple itself.

"Those might be magic clouds," a Gnome priest who seemed to have lived many times longer than the young Elf finally muttered.

"Magic clouds?"

"Yes. Though I only know of them from stories passed down. These unnatural clouds look too similar to the magic clouds that appeared in this fortified city only once, about fifty years ago."

The eyes of all the priests present turned to the old Gnome.

"Are they an omen of misfortune?" another priest asked.

"No, they don't seem to be that kind of thing, but... I heard that when a powerful ancient magic, now considered taboo, was awakened, a thick, dark magic cloud like this covered the sky above it."

"So, is a forbidden ancient spell being performed somewhere in this city?"

"I don't know about that. It could just be a thundercloud," the Gnome said, shaking his head quietly. "Let's return to the temple. The afternoon worship will begin soon."

Still preoccupied with the dark clouds, the Cant priests followed the old Gnome back into the temple. Just as they did, a man suddenly appeared in the plaza.

He was a tall man clad in expensive-looking robes of black velvet embroidered with various patterns in red, gold, and silver threads. He also wore a thick cloak over it. The high collar of his cloak half-hid his face. His features could only be discerned from the front opening. The man had no hair on his head. What's more, not a single strand of hair grew on his face, not even a beard or eyebrows. But there was something else on the man's face that was more eye-catching.

A bizarre tattoo was meticulously etched across his entire face, from his bald head down to his eyelids. A red kumadori pattern was drawn around his sharp eyes, making it appear at first glance as if the embroidery of his robe had extended onto his face. He looked like the shaman of a primitive religion still worshiped in the uncivilized lands of the south, wearing a mask.

The man looked up at the black clouds, smiled with satisfaction, and calmly walked toward the temple's entrance. On either side of the entrance, two guards stood watch to prevent the entry of suspicious people. Although the Cant Temple was generally open to all, the Trebor army had stationed soldiers there because thieves targeting the large donations and equipment of the deceased were a constant problem.

The tattooed man climbed the stone steps without a care for the guards.

"Halt!"

The two guards, their helmets pulled low, crossed their spears in front of the man, blocking his way. The man stopped.

"What's your business at this temple? You don't look like an adventurer." The guard on the right, who seemed to be of lower rank, pushed up his helmet and looked at the man. "A suspicious person... *Gaaah*!"

It was then that he first noticed the man's unusual face. His body stiffened in shock and fear at the sight of the tattooed face that had suddenly entered his vision. The tremor passed through his spear to the guard on his left.

"What's wrong?"

The other guard, who also looked up, gasped. He tried to raise his spear in a hurry, but his body was too tense to obey. By the time the two of them had finally re-positioned their spears, two breaths had already passed.

"Who are you?!"

"A demon?!"

As the guards yelled and prepared to thrust their spears, the man, who hadn't moved an inch, spoke in a quiet but resonant voice.

"Fools! Even if you don't know my face, surely you've heard of these tattoos."

He pierced the guards with a sharp, needle-like gaze. Overwhelmed, they instinctively took a step back. The guard on the left let out a short gasp.

"Could it be... Lord Grebnag?"

The man glared at that guard.

"It's not 'could it be.' If you understand, lower your spears quickly. I have business inside."

Ignoring the guards who immediately assumed a position of salutation, the man—Grebnag—entered the Cant Temple. Among the Trebor Royal Guard, a unit composed mainly of Warriors, Samurai, Lords, and Ninjas, this man, Grebnag, was one of the few spellcasters and was known as the very brain of King Trebor. He had mastered all spellcaster spells and was currently at level 15. He was a man feared by both friend and foe as the "Masked Fiend," due

to his genius as a military strategist in battle and the bizarre tattoos on his face.

The courageous but hot-headed Trebor was able to steadily expand his territory in successive campaigns thanks in large part to the power of the Talisman and the strategies Grebnag had devised. It was actually this man who had come up with the plan to recruit adventurers to reclaim the Talisman from Werdna. He was the sharpest mind in the Royal Guard and was trusted implicitly by Trebor.

Grebnag strode down the red carpet, heading deeper into the temple.

The air inside was dark and cold. Although light entered from the clerestory windows at the top of the high ceiling and walls, the faint light from the candles lit on both sides of the passage felt stronger. The passage was surprisingly long, extending far beyond what the temple's exterior suggested. Along the way, several doors decorated with magnificent carvings lined the walls, but Grebnag ignored them, walking straight toward the large door at the end of the passage.

When Grebnag struck the knocker of the closed large door, a narrow, horizontal peephole opened at eye level. After a pair of eyes confirmed his identity, the door swung open ponderously within seconds.

Inside the door was a large sanctuary. In front of a magnificent altar, more than twenty Cant priests were seated in silent prayer. Almost all the priests in the temple had gathered for the noon worship. Ignoring the elderly gatekeeper priest who bowed deeply, Grebnag walked around the seated priests and went further inside.

Behind the altar, on the opposite side of the sanctuary from the main door, a narrow staircase leading to the basement was hidden. He opened the hidden door with a practiced hand and began to descend the stairs.

The stairs descended in a gentle spiral. The only sound was the low chanting of the worship service echoing, other than Grebnag's footsteps. After descending what felt like three stories, the space finally opened up.

It was a dome-shaped underground room about ten meters in

diameter. The walls and ceiling were integrated into the shape of an inverted mortar. In the center of the room, a strange altar was set up. It was built of black oak and was shaped like a small coffin. At both ends, horned skulls were set facing each other. Inside the skulls' wide-open mouths, red candles flickered with an ominous blue flame.

And in the center of the altar, between the skulls, was something unbelievable: the head of an Orc. The half-decayed head of the Orc was illuminated by the pale blue flames from both sides, casting an even more grotesque shadow.

This was a repulsive ritual of an evil cult, and it was being performed deep beneath the holy ground of the Cant Temple.

After surveying the altar, a chilling smile appeared on Grebnag's face.

"Everything is going well. The Orc head and the soul flame will last for a while. This is thanks to the strong spiritual energy of this underground room."

Just then, he sensed someone coming down the stairs behind him. An elderly priest appeared before Grebnag as he turned. He wore a more dignified-looking robe than the other priests and was clearly of high rank. It seemed he had rushed here as soon as he heard of Grebnag's arrival. Half out of breath, the old priest looked at him with eyes burning with anger.

Grebnag, however, took it in stride with a calm expression.

"I apologize for the intrusion, High Priest."

"What is the meaning of this, Lord Grebnag?" The old High Priest desperately held back his rising emotions before finally speaking. "I was not told that you would place a desecrated altar of an evil cult —something we are not even allowed to touch—in the most sacred foundation of this temple."

Grebnag sneered. "It would have been a lot of trouble to explain. You shouldn't make a fuss over something so small."

"How can you say that when you've brought the corpse of a monster into this holy building?! There is no temple in this world that would allow such an act!" The High Priest's body trembled. "And what about that cloud? It is surely a magic cloud caused by a powerful

spell exceeding the seven spheres. And our temple is at its very center! You are not, by any chance, performing a forbidden ancient spell in this place. I have been waiting for you to arrive since this morning. Immediately remove that repulsive altar and—"

"Be silent, High Priest," Grebnag said sharply. His tone allowed for no argument. There was no deference to the High Priest, the highest authority in the Cant Temple.

"Listen, High Priest. I am acting under the direct orders of His Majesty King Trebor. You are to understand that everything I am doing is by His Majesty's will. Do you understand what this means?"

"That is why you, an outsider, were allowed into this place, which is only accessible to those authorized within our order. However, what you are doing now is a dark ritual that originates from the worship of an evil god. If we allow such a thing, the authority of our order will be brought to ruin. I cannot approve this."

"Why don't you just give it a rest?" Grebnag's tone became threatening. "I am not asking for permission. This fortified city is under the direct control of His Majesty King Trebor. If it comes to it, I wouldn't hesitate to lead not just a few guards but an entire company to seize this temple. If you tell me I cannot use it, that is."

The High Priest's face changed color. "What, you would let soldiers trample on this historic Cant Temple?"

"Indeed. Your permission would simply mean a little more trouble for me."

With that, Grebnag turned his back on the now crestfallen High Priest and faced the heretical altar. "You had better leave now. Once the incantation begins, this place will be filled with what you priests call an evil miasma. It wouldn't look good for the High Priest to be tainted by it."

The High Priest tried to leave the small dome, but he stopped and muttered one last thing. "Tampering with a person's soul is a magic of ruin, Lord Grebnag..."

"The same goes for both of us. Thank you for yesterday's matter. I will have a gift sent to you later."

After the High Priest left, Grebnag's chilling smile returned.

"The way this is set up, a spell that requires a life sacrifice can be

performed as a mere sideline, and any annoying people can be naturally removed. Healing and resurrection are not the only uses of the Cant Temple..."

Grebnag raised both his arms from beneath his cloak. The blue flames flickered faintly.

"O, spirits of darkness!"

The candles flared up violently, and flames seemed to spew from the mouths of the skulls. The incantation had begun.

Scene 14. Deep Floor

It was a sea of blood.

A large amount of blood was splattered at Skallda's feet.

This was the ninth floor of the underground labyrinth, a great hall with the only entrance leading to the tenth and lowest floor.

About half an hour had passed since Skallda's quick thinking had calmed the trap of the Huge Spiders, set up by Ha-Kim and his party. To make up for the delay, they had descended rapidly from the south end of the fourth floor using the second elevator.

As soon as they reached the ninth floor, a strong smell of blood filled the air. A sickening stench wafted out from the door right in front of them. Kicking the door open, the party rushed into the great hall and found a group of monsters lying sprawled in their own blood and entrails.

It appeared to be a mixed unit of Fire Giants, ninjas, and Lesser Demons. With the tremendous strength of the giants, the magic-adept demons, and the one-hit-kill techniques of the ninjas, they should have been a formidable bunch on this floor. Yet, they had been completely and utterly decimated.

The Fire Giants had apparently been relentlessly attacked with cold spells; their corpses were all a dark purplish color. Some parts were completely frozen and even shattered. The Lesser Demons were four-armed devils, twice the height of a human, with excellent durability. But their torsos had been sliced clean in two, and they lay dead on the floor. It seemed they didn't even have time to return to their rightful home in the Demon Realm.

As for the red-robed ninjas, they were completely unrecognizable. They looked like nothing more than mangled clumps of flesh stuck to the floor.

The black stains in various spots on the floor appeared to be dispelled Nightstalkers. They were a terrifying undead monster that possessed an energy drain attack, sucking the life force from their opponents and even stealing their accumulated experience. But against a high-level cleric, they didn't stand a chance.

This was the work of the evil party of Ha-Kim and Gogleg.

Their skill was frightening. On the ninth floor, the power of the monsters that dwelt there was nothing short of incredible. While some could cast spells of the *Mahalito* class, many monsters possessed special abilities that could instantly annihilate a party with a single moment of carelessness, such as powerful fiery breaths or energy drains. Their durability was also off the charts.

And yet, these guys had been unilaterally slaughtered with what looked like surprising ease.

To be honest, Skallda hadn't even considered that Ha-Kim and his party had this much power.

"The way this is cut is incredible," Gadi said, looking at the Lesser Demon's corpse. "That's Gogleg's work. You can't normally cut them like this."

"The dispel is also masterful. Five Nightstalkers have been completely turned to dust. It seems that Alheim is incorporating the sorcery he learned from various places into his dispel spells." Belial said, examining the black stains. Vulcan watched him with great interest.

"They're quite good," Sara said. "At this rate, they might go to defeat Werdna right away."

"Hey, don't joke around. We've come all this way only to have that fool Ha-Kim steal Werdna's head from us." Jaba looked at Skallda.

"Let's hurry. We won't get back to your old form today, but we have to at least get our level 10 conditioning back, or they'll beat us to it."

"Yeah."

"Anyway, I'd rather die than team up with anyone but you to defeat Werdna."

Those were grateful words. Skallda nodded silently, then stepped over the monsters' corpses and walked to the back of the great hall. He had been a party with Jaba ever since they arrived in the fortress city, but he had never felt such strong friendship as he did at this moment.

In the northwest corner of the great hall, a deep hole opened up.

It was a chute formed by melting the thick bedrock of the floor with

something like a powerful acid. A circular darkness, two meters in diameter, led deep underground. It was the one and only entrance to Werdna's labyrinth's lowest floor, the tenth basement level. It was a creation made long ago by a nearly annihilated Werdna extermination party under the command of their leader, Knacklave.

Sliding down here would lead them to Werdna's lair.

Skallda stood at the edge of the chute and looked around at his comrades who had followed him.

"Let's go."

Skallda jumped down. Since the hole became a gentle slope partway down, a rope was not necessary.

One by one, everyone entered the chute at regular intervals. The last to enter, Sara, vanished into the deep darkness. The presence of people disappeared from the great hall.

Then, something slowly unfurled its black wings.

Its crimson eyes glowed with a bewitching light.

From who knows when, a large bat had been hanging upside down in the high-ceilinged gloom. It narrowed its eyes eerily, flapped its wings two or three times, and flew off somewhere. Its form melted into the darkness in an instant.

Silence returned.

Scene 15. Cavern of Werdna

Rather than an underground labyrinth, the tenth subterranean level is a cave.

While the other levels are artificial mazes created by Werdna's magic, this one was originally a cavern formed by air pockets gathering as the earth's bedrock solidified, later refined into a passageway with some modifications.

Roughly hewn and stacked rocks on the walls were melted into a glassy substance by the flames of fire dragons and chimeras, then solidified into an incredibly hard surface.

The ceiling and floor, while slightly sloped, were so smooth you would never have guessed they were originally a cave. This was a monumental undertaking, but for Werdna, who commanded the immense labor of the Giant race, it was apparently a trifling matter.

It was a subterranean **ma-kuts** created by monsters. As a lair for Werdna, the great evil archmage said to be over a hundred years old, there was no more suitable place.

Currently, only two parties, Skallda's and Jaba's, have ventured down to this level, and that was only within the last week or so.

Several parties had attempted it before then. But in most cases, as soon as their party's wizard learned 5th-level spells—such as *Madalto*, the most powerful mid-range attack spell, or *Makanito*, which instantly turns low-level monsters to dust—they became overconfident and went too deep. Only a single party survived.

That party was composed of members who had trained for years in other countries, rich in both knowledge and experience. When Skallda's group was finally certified as Level 9, these newcomers suddenly appeared in the fortress city with Level 12 strength, and it was rumored that they would take down Werdna immediately.

The leader, a dwarven warrior, was a skilled veteran, considered a hero in the northern countries.

However, even of that party, only two survived, including the leader. They had accidentally entered Werdna's room and were hit with a surprise attack from Werdna and his monster guards.

When they panicked and cast the *Malor* spell to escape, there were only two of them left. Both were mortally wounded with irreversible injuries and died shortly after reaching the fortress.

The information Skallda's party had about Werdna was based entirely on the delirious ramblings of the leader just before he died, his hair and beard having turned white from the terror of suffering a four-level energy drain from the vampire guards.

The tenth level is divided into seven underground caves, at the end of which is a crypt where a monster guard unit waits. The areas are connected by one-way teleportation zones, making it essentially a single path.

In each crypt, with the exception of the seventh area, which is Werdna's room, a teleportation zone was set up to return the adventurer to the shoot from the 9th level. The fact that a separate teleportation zone for escaping to the surface was also provided seemed to suggest that Werdna was showing adventurers mercy. After all, this was the only way to return to the surface without a *Malor* spell.

The monster guards, on the other hand, were a collection of vicious races with no mercy whatsoever.

They included the Giant race, led by Poison Giants; the Dragon race, which could wield more advanced spells than most wizards; and Werdna's personal unit of Vampires, led by a Vampire Lord. High-level ninjas and samurai who had sold their souls to Werdna also joined them, a fighting force said to rival an entire army.

And, throughout this entire level, a barrier was cast to interfere with the *Malor* spell. All teleportation spells within the tenth level are repelled back to their origin by the powerful magic barrier. Therefore, it was impossible to conserve spells, and to fight Werdna, one had to defeat his guard unit at the very least.

This was the full extent of the information Skallda's group had.

As Skallda's party descended the shoot, they found a strange stone monument.

Engraved on the monument was a glowing, color-shifting inscription.

The inscription was written in the ancient language favored by

wizards.

It was Werdna's warning. The words proclaimed that this was his territory and that those who trespassed would be met with doom.

The party gave the monument a quick glance and walked silently into the depths of the cave.

Even Jaba, who would normally curse at a monument like this, kept his expression grim, not uttering a word.

Even a party with as much hidden potential as these adventurers knew better than to underestimate the monsters of the lowest level. There were many creatures that would exploit a moment's hesitation to inflict devastating damage on the entire party. Jaba, leading the way, was sharpening his senses as much as possible.

The winding underground passage continued for a considerable distance before reaching the first crypt.

They could run into a patrol of monsters at any moment as they turned the corner.

However, something else occupied the depths of Jaba's mind.

Rasha.

The face of a red-haired girl suddenly appeared in his mind, and Jaba was jolted back to reality.

What's up with her, always contradicting me.

In his mind, Rasha's face became much more innocent and childlike.

Jaba was remembering the village where he was born and grew up until he was fifteen.

The village was in a neighboring country, a three-day journey south of the fortress city, near Trebor's territory. It was a poor, small village that relied mostly on mountain grazing and a bit of farming.

Jaba was born the son of the village's only hunter.

His mother died less than a month after giving birth to him. The one who stepped up to be his wet nurse, for a toothless infant, was the mother of a girl named Rasha, who had been born shortly after him.

When he was three, his father was killed in a fight with a man-

eating bear. From then on, Rasha's family became Jaba's.

The two of them grew up like true siblings.

In the year they turned fourteen, a terrible drought struck the village. There was almost no crop harvest that year, and many goats, their livestock, died.

More than half of the goats Rasha's father owned died, and the female goats stopped giving birth the following year.

It was around this time that Jaba heard about Werdna's subjugation. With no crop seeds and a dwindling herd, the family of four could not survive.

Although Rasha's parents had raised him as their own son, he didn't hesitate to leave the village. If he didn't, his entire family would starve.

Besides, if he could join Trebor's royal guard, he could move his family into the royal castle.

And so, Jaba became an adventurer.

He had wanted to be a warrior, like his strong father, but unfortunately, he had no talent for it. However, he was unusually dexterous for a human and was blessed with good luck, so he became a thief. Most of those who came here with no training, like him, were turned away because they couldn't choose any of the adventuring professions, so he was indeed lucky.

Around the same time, he teamed up with two newcomers, Skallda and Sara, and they had been training together ever since.

Rasha followed him half a year later.

She, too, was unsuited for any profession other than a thief. When she appeared before Jaba, she had already registered as an adventurer and was wearing leather armor.

It was a calculated move born of her desire to live with Jaba, whom she adored like an older brother. But a single party didn't need two thieves.

Jaba advised her to return to the village and refused to let her join the party.

Naturally, Rasha rebelled. And as if to spite him, she moved from

party to party.

She joined Ha-kim's party three months before Alheim came.

Being with guys like that, if she gets corrupted, I won't be able to face her parents.

As he was thinking this, Jaba's awareness of his surroundings gradually faded.

The passageway took a sharp turn to the right. The first crypt was in the blind spot beyond.

A quiet call brought Jaba's sinking consciousness back to the surface.

It was Gadi who called out. Jaba stopped, and everyone else came to a halt.

"I sense something. It's not just one person in front of the door."

The door was the entrance to the crypt. Something seemed to be in front of it.

"Is it a monster?" Sara asked.

"Most likely, but I can't tell what kind," Gadi's hearing was incredibly sharp. He had picked up the sound made by whatever was in front of the door sooner than anyone else. "From the sound, it's not a big one. Human-sized at best."

"It's a human. Looks like there are two of them," Skallda said. Because he was sensing their presence through their breathing, not sound, he could get a clearer image of them.

"Two people... sounds like a High Priest. Alright, I'll go first and use *Montino* to block their spells. I'll leave the rest to you." Saying this, Belial began the incantation for a priest spell, with its unique rhythm. Since he knew where they were, he could time the spell to cast the moment he emerged from the blind spot.

The party moved quickly.

Jaba, Gadi, and Skallda formed a tight formation, with Belial right behind them. Sara and Vulcan stood ready to cast support spells in case of an emergency.

They each hid their small lamps behind their shields or clothes and

advanced through the passage, taking care not to be noticed.

The crypt door came into view from the blind spot.

The next moment, the *Montino* spell erupted from Belial's mouth with a low growl.

A priest who had noticed Skallda's party in the dim light in front of the door tried to shout something. But the spell was already taking effect, so no words came out.

In that instant, the three front-liners charged.

Jaba headed toward the figure who was just starting to stand up.

The opponent was defenseless. A single swing of his sword would easily take off their head.

But something was bothering Jaba. In less than a hundredth of a second, that strange sense of unease swelled up.

He had seen the movement of the person rising before him somewhere. An unconscious restraint took hold of the arm that was about to swing the sword.

When he pulled his shield arm back, a beam of light from his lamp escaped. The light illuminated red hair and leather armor.

It was Rasha.

"!"

Jaba froze completely.

Rasha, who had been showing a look of shock and terror at the armored figure rushing toward her, finally realized who it was. Her lips moved as if to confirm, "Jaba?"

Gadi and Skallda, who were also about to attack the other person, stopped in their tracks.

The other person, who had looked like a High Priest, was Alheim.

Belial and the others, who had run up to see what was happening after the front-liners stopped, also realized who the opponents were.

Alheim was standing almost in the center of the heavy, steel crypt door. The light from Gadi's lamp danced across his face.

Even in the dim, yellow light, Alheim's face was clearly pale. The

cynical smile that usually clung to the corners of his mouth was gone.

Just then, the effect of Belial's spell wore off.

Alheim's mouth twisted slightly. He seemed to be trying to force a smile.

"You caught up to us rather quickly. How did you get past the Huge Spiders? With *Malor*, or maybe five or six *Makanito*?"

Alheim was clearly putting on a brave face.

"Quite the elaborate trap. But I'll spare you the details for now," Skallda said.

"..."

"More importantly, why are you two alone down here? You haven't had a falling out on the tenth level, have you?"

"Did you try to pull something funny with Rasha—" Jaba interrupted.

"That's not it, Jaba," Rasha's voice trembled. "Ha-kim and the others are dead. The blue monsters got them... in an instant..."

"What?!" Skallda flipped up his helmet's faceguard. "Ha-kim? And Gogleg? And did you say 'blue monsters'?"

"Yes, Alheim and I just escaped through that door."

Rasha's shoulders shook violently as she said this. Her emotions were running high, and tears spilled out. Jaba put a hand on her shoulder.

Skallda's gaze fell on the heavy, sturdy steel door. He felt as if the miasma of the demonic world was about to gush out from its cracks.

He was sure he knew what the blue monsters that had attacked Ha-kim's party were.

It's him. The Greater Demon that took Silver's life and laughed at me is on the other side of this door.

The thought made his blood feel like it was rushing in reverse.

"I've magically locked the door. Even that huge monster won't be

able to open it for a while," Alheim sighed heavily, apparently giving up his pretense. "I'll tell you the story now. The story of how our evil party was instantly annihilated."

Scene 16. Death Blow

Ha-Kim and his companions expertly dispatched the monsters in the Chamber of the Ninth Floor, and now they strode triumphantly through the underground passages of the lowest level.

"Heehee, this feels great. We're in top form, and those Skallda guys shouldn't be coming down here anytime soon."

"It was a rare perfume, but with that many spiders gathering, it was well worth the high price we paid."

Alheim said with a smug look, pleased that his plan had worked.

Like ripples, Sandra's and Roodra's stifled laughter echoed. Gogleg, not even cracking a smile, kept his guard up, watching his surroundings.

"Jaba will really be okay, won't he?"

Rasha glared at Alheim.

"Of course. Just think. No matter if there are two hundred of them, they're just spiders. They aren't the kind of enemies who would cause him to lose his life, and even if he were to be poisoned, Belial could easily heal him. Besides, an interference that threatens someone's life creates resentment. I wouldn't want to make enemies of those people. This is just a way to stall them."

"Interfering with them like that is already like making an enemy of them."

"So worried? That's cute, Rasha. Heeheehee…"

Ha-Kim turned back as he walked, narrowing his eyes.

"It's alright, you know, to switch parties. I'm finally getting the hang of disarming traps myself."

"Stop it. I'm not joining that party unless Jaba asks me to."

Rasha turned her face away.

Ha-Kim made a sound like a grunt of amusement one or two times, then turned to face forward again.

"Well, it's us who are going to kill Werdna. Even if Jaba were to ask you, leaving now would be a loss."

The door to the first Chamber was already in front of them.

Ha-Kim crept up to the door and pressed his ear to it, listening for sounds. If guards were lying in wait, he would hear even a single muffled breath.

But there was no sign of anything. At the signal of Ha-Kim's raised hand, everyone got ready. Gogleg approached the door, and with Ha-Kim, put his hand on it and pushed.

The door opened smoothly and slowly. At the same time, the party rushed into the Chamber.

The Chamber was like a small arena, carved even deeper into the underground cavern.

In the center of it, two hobbits were seated. They were clad in red robes, the same as the ninjas they had defeated on the Ninth Floor.

For Ha-Kim and his companions, they were not a particularly frightening opponent.

"Heehee, Gogleg, let's finish this in one go."

Ha-Kim charged forward at the speed of a gale. Gogleg followed behind him, moving with an agility that belied his massive body.

The two ninjas rose up unsteadily.

?

A chilling premonition arose within Alheim. Something was strange about the ninjas.

"Ha-Kim! Be careful, those guys are—"

The moment he shouted, a faint blue sphere of fire appeared behind the ninjas. It expanded silently before their eyes.

Ha-Kim and Gogleg stopped their charge.

The fire sphere continued to expand and contract as if it were beating. Its size had already grown to a diameter of over three meters.

The red-robed ninjas did not attack the halted Ha-Kim and his companions, but stood upright in front of the fire sphere. It was as if they were possessed by something.

Inside the blue flames, a shadow stirred.

"What is this?"

Before Ha-Kim could finish the words, a gigantic blue arm with four sharp claws shot out from within the flames. It swept sideways toward Ha-Kim.

"Hmph!"

Completely caught off guard, Ha-Kim was struck across the torso by a claw as thick as his wrist. The lightweight Ha-Kim was sent flying amusingly and was slammed against the side wall.

As if that were a signal, the same fire spheres appeared all at once around them. Including the first one, six fire spheres filled the Chamber.

Gah, haaa...

The shadows within the fire spheres exhaled a smoky breath.

The flames disappeared.

In his hazy consciousness, Ha-Kim saw six giant demons materialize one after another.

Scene 17. Death Blow 2

The being that had sent Ha-Kim flying appeared, crouched on all fours. Even in this posture, it was easily twice the height of a man. If it were to stand, it would surely reach the ceiling of the sanctuary.

It was a Greater Daemon. The Lesser Daemons, a species from the same demonic realm, are already as large as Giants, but this one was two whole sizes larger. The creature's limbs were a thick bundle of muscles, speaking to its immense strength. Four sword-like claws jutted from the end of each arm. Each one was terrifyingly thick and sharp, capable of cleaving rock.

It scraped its claws lightly across the floor, and a harsh, metallic sound echoed. A pair of wings unfolded from its back with a rustle.

Gash.

From between countless gnashing fangs, breath in the form of steam was exhaled. Behind the vapor, two dull, expressionless eyes with no pupils stared back. It was a creature so terrifying it made you instinctively cower.

From its forehead, two thick, curved horns, like those of a sheep, grew out to the sides. Below them was a face resembling an ape's skull, yet the overall impression was closer to a reptile. Sharp fangs overflowed from a mouth that was split all the way to its ears.

The mouth slowly opened into a twisted grin. The upper and lower lids of its round eyes covered the pupils, narrowing them to thin slits. It was laughing. It was the expression of a highly intelligent life form mocking those inferior to it. Then, it stood.

The five other demons, which had materialized slightly after the first one, also rose to their feet, their massive bodies shaking. This was the same kind of monster that a single one of them had sent Skallda’s party—said to be the most capable adventurers—into retreat. Now, there were six of them. It was a truly formidable force. But Alheim and his comrades were yet to learn of their power.

"Ha-Kim!" Alheim cried out to Ha-Kim, who had just been slammed violently into the stone wall.

He had taken a direct hit from that claw. Even with his sturdy magical Armor of Evil, he couldn't escape physical damage from the impact. It was a blow that would have shattered the bones of an ordinary person. For Ha-Kim, a ninja whose body had been trained to the limit, it would have been no surprise if he were dead.

Alheim's cry brought Ha-Kim's clouded consciousness back. Immediately, intense pain engulfed his body. Several of his ribs were completely crushed. The excruciating pain anchored his fading consciousness to reality.

Gathering all his strength, he sprang to his feet and sprinted across the floor with incredible speed. It was the resilience of a ninja who had turned his own body into a weapon.

At the same time, Gogleg charged the leading daemon. A ninja in red robes tried to block his path.

"*Nngh*." Gogleg barely slowed down, swinging his sword down at an angle. The ninja tried to block it with an arm protected by a gauntlet. But the sword did not stop. It sliced through the ninja's arm, gauntlet and all, and continued to cleave the body in two, from the left shoulder to the right flank.

The power of the sword was incredible. It was a mass-produced item known as the Sword of Slashing, slightly inferior to the Sword of Kasinart, but it had been reforged specifically for Gogleg to be twice the usual weight. Its destructive power was immense, but the strength of Gogleg, who wielded it, was even more so.

Flinging the lifeless ninja aside, Gogleg closed the distance to the Greater Daemon in a single breath. Ha-Kim ran past him, heading for a demon in the back.

With a sharp yell, Gogleg’s sword sliced through the air. Putting his full body weight behind it, he struck the monster's lower abdomen. It was the same blow that had easily slain the Lesser Daemon moments before. The moment the sword touched the Greater Daemon, Gogleg was certain of victory. No matter how monstrous the creature, a blow from this sword to the abdomen would be a fatal wound.

But what transmitted through his arm was not the sensation of a blade slicing flesh, but the impact of hitting solid rock.

Wha!?

The sword had only slightly embedded its tip in the demon’s abdomen and had stopped. With the force of its muscles, it was immediately pushed out.

Gash.

A large amount of steam was released from the Greater Daemon's mouth, far above his head. Gogleg leapt back. The thick claws swept through the space he had just occupied with terrifying speed.

As Gogleg retreated, he caught a glimpse of Ha-Kim climbing up the body of another Greater Daemon. It was a strategy unique to ninjas, aiming for the head, the most vulnerable point. However, against such a massive opponent, it was a feat only Ha-Kim's agility could pull off. He plunged a kunai into the body of a monster nearly five times his height, climbing it with the agility of a monkey.

But that was all he could do. The damage to his ribs significantly hampered his speed.

The Greater Daemon’s arm caught Ha-Kim. It pulled him off its shoulder, lifted him to the height of the ceiling, and then slammed him down onto the floor.

"*Gah*!" All the air was forced from his lungs. Bouncing off the rock floor, Ha-Kim rebounded high. Just before he fell back to the ground, another red-clad ninja came into his view. It was the last thing Ha-Kim would ever see.

The red ninja's sword flashed, and as Ha-Kim's head tumbled away, the Greater Daemon’s foot was already descending. A sickening sound echoed: the squelch of bones and liquids. Beneath the Greater Daemon's foot, Ha-Kim's head was crushed.

At this point, no magic could ever resurrect him.

Sandra and Rudra, the siblings, simultaneously cast the same spell at the horde of monsters. The air around them grew taut, and the temperature dropped sharply. It was *Madalto*, a spell that freezes enemies with cold and destroys their cells. The range was medium, but if cast by two people at once, its power was comparable to *Tiltowait*. It was the most powerful attack the two of them could currently perform.

In the center of the Greater Daemons, the air began to freeze with a loud sound. The cold instantly expanded, and the monsters should

have been enveloped in a hell of raging ice and snow. But the spell was nullified.

It was spell neutralization. A powerful magic possessed by a select few, such as Undead Monsters and demons, that can neutralize magic cast upon them. Sandra and Rudra's eyes widened. They heard the same chant they had just spoken in their ears. Fear filled their faces.

A new fireball appeared before Gogleg. Through the fireball, a point of contact with the demonic realm, a new Greater Daemon was about to materialize.

"*Gah*!" Gogleg roared.

"Don't, Gogleg! Run!" Before Alheim could shout, Gogleg's body plunged into the fireball. In the blue flames, two shadows intertwined and vanished along with the fireball.

Madalto is coming.

"Run!" Alheim turned his back on the monsters and ran. In front of him, a stunned Rasha stood frozen in place. Alheim threw down his shield and wrapped his arms around her slender waist.

Alheim ran toward the open door, with Sandra and the others following him. Three of the Greater Daemons spread their arms. The low chant of Madalt squeezed from their thick throats resonated with each other, vibrating the air.

Just as Alheim tumbled out of the sanctuary, an unimaginable cold enveloped Sandra and Rudra. The water inside their bodies instantly froze. Turning back, Alheim cast a locking spell to temporarily seal all the doors. With a heavy thud, the doors began to close. Through the gap, he could see Sandra and her siblings shattering into pieces of ice.

The door closed. A great pressure from the inside pushed against it, making it creak violently. After a few seconds, the pressure abruptly vanished. No other sounds could be heard from within.

But in the ears of Alheim and Rasha, the monstrous laughter, similar to the roar of a beast, continued to echo...

Scene 18. Flack

"Ha-Kim... just like that," Skallda muttered.

The party had set up camp in front of the antechamber.

"Camp," in this case, didn't mean pitching tents for a bivouac. In a dungeon, it meant a magical barrier that kept monsters at bay. Everyone would gather in a circle and draw a magic circle around them with holy water. This kept any monsters from approaching those within the barrier or attacking with spells.

However, this effect also sealed off all offensive spells from the party, making it impossible to fight enemies while inside the barrier. The barrier itself didn't last long and was only for brief periods of rest.

At the camp, Skallda's party was joined by Alheim and Rasha. Several lamps were gathered in the center, and everyone sat around them. Alheim had just finished his story.

"Gogleg is probably not alive, either. The fireball is a door connecting the Demon Realm and this world. If you jump into it, you'll end up in the Demon Realm—a different dimension where flames swirl and blizzards rage. A non-demon wouldn't last even a moment." Belial spoke quietly.

"So even a battle-hardened warrior is no match?" Gadi stared at the flickering lamp flame, letting out a sigh.

"Our bodies are made differently from monsters. Our skin would burn and fester, or suffer frostbite and begin to die."

"..."

At that moment, Vulcan, who had barely spoken since his incident with Skallda, opened his mouth.

"What are we going to do, go help them?" The tone was mocking.

"Help? Gogleg?" Skallda asked back.

"Not that fool who dove into the Demon Realm. The corpses on the other side of this door. This man's story says it's hopeless, but it's only been half an hour since they died. There might still be a chance to resurrect them."

"You're telling us to storm the antechamber?"

"Oh? Are you scared?" Vulcan's tone became provocative.

"What did you say?"

"You'd show mercy to an orc but don't have the guts to save a person. You're quite the hypocrite."

"This is no time to start a fight." Belial interjected. "But either way, we must decide what to do here, Skallda."

"Yes. We can't just stand by." Skallda looked at Vulcan with a sharp gaze. "Do we give up on any more training for today and run back to the castle, or do we proceed through this door?"

"The problem is whether that demon is still there. If there are six of them, we have no chance of winning."

"Just as this world isn't suited for us, the Demon Realm isn't a place for demons to maintain their physical form for long," Sara said. "Considering the time, I think it's more likely that they've returned to the Demon Realm."

"I'd like to go on, too. It might be a chance to help people." With that, Skallda glared at Vulcan again. Vulcan met his gaze head-on.

"Were the rumors true about you bringing someone from the Evil law into your party?" Alheim, who had finally recovered his sarcastic smile, looked up. "I heard that last night and couldn't believe it."

"I was the one who dragged him in. It's not easy to find someone to replace Silver," Jaba replied.

"I thought you were the one who hated us Evil people."

"I don't like it, true. But I hated the thought of you guys getting Werdna's head even more."

"You don't have to worry about that anymore," Alheim said, letting out a laugh that was half-mocking. His face suddenly took on the expression of someone who had just remembered something. "The Locking spell should be wearing off soon."

Everyone looked at the door. There was no change. Just as they were about to look away with relief, the door suddenly opened inward.

"What is it?" Jaba stood up.

"Wait. Don't break the camp yet." Cautiously, Skallda stood up and stared at the entrance of the antechamber, only a few steps from their circle.

The door was completely open inward.

The lamps Ha-Kim and his party had been using were all extinguished or crushed, leaving the depths of the antechamber shrouded in darkness. The light from Skallda's lamp barely illuminated the floor near the entrance, sparkling on what appeared to be fragments of ice that were once Sandra and Rudra.

"Alheim, does the Locking spell open the door for us when it wears off?"

"No."

"It looks like that monster isn't inside. But I don't think the door would just open on its own."

"Could it be another guardian?" Belial asked.

"It's like it's inviting us. I've never encountered an enemy that clever in this dungeon."

Skallda closed his eyes, concentrating his mind to sense the "presence" of whatever was lurking in the darkness. But no sign of a presence came from the antechamber. When he looked at Gadi, Gadi shook his head slightly, as if to say he felt the same.

Skallda made up his mind. "Let's go. Our goal is to defeat monsters and hone our skills. Let's accept this invitation."

"That's more like it," Gadi said, rising with a lightness that belied his size.

"What about Rasha and the others?" Jaba asked, looking at Rasha sitting beside him. They couldn't just leave Rasha alone, who, unlike Alheim, hadn't yet recovered from the shock of Ha-Kim's death.

"We'll break the camp and have the two of them set up a new barrier just for themselves. Once we deal with whatever is in the room, they can use a teleportation square to return to the surface. Is that alright, Alheim?"

"That's fine. If need be, we can just go back down this passage." Alheim gave a twisted smile.

Everyone stood up. Skallda's group of six formed a line.

"Let's go. I don't know what's in there, but it must be getting quite impatient."

The barrier was dispelled. The party quickly approached the entrance, peering inside. Behind them, Alheim began to sprinkle holy water and draw a magic circle again.

First Jaba, then Gadi and Skallda, leaped into the antechamber. The remaining three followed without delay.

In the center of the antechamber lay Ha-Kim's headless body. A large pool of blood surrounded the corpse. A little further away was Ha-Kim's head, crushed into a lump of flesh.

Near the entrance, a red ninja, sliced in two, clung to the floor like a rag, its intestines spilled out. And then—

Right next to Ha-Kim's body, another red ninja lay dead. It was lying on its back, as if a body laid to rest in a shrine.

How strange. That ninja has no external injuries.

Just as Skallda felt a sense of unease about the corpse, a bone-chilling laugh echoed from the corner of the room, where light could not reach.

"Welcome to my little theater. It's been a long time since I had guests—no, an audience—since the last expedition sent by King Trebor arrived. I will welcome you warmly."

The voice sounded like a mix of a child and an old man speaking at the same time.

Something leaped out of the darkness. It looked like a green sphere, spinning rapidly on its vertical axis, falling in a gentle arc toward the center of the room. It landed just beyond Ha-Kim's body and stopped spinning.

"I heard that adventurers have finally started reaching this level again. Two parties, in fact. It seems one of them is the hobbit lying over there. What a shame I couldn't meet him."

Skallda finally realized that the sphere was a small man curled up

with his knees to his chest. The little man extended his limbs in a motion reminiscent of a slug's body, then stood up.

He was a bizarre man. He was shorter than a hobbit, but his physical features were that of an adult human, only shrunken down. The man was dressed in a green jester's outfit. In his arms, he held a strangely shaped staff. His face was covered by a mask of an old man with an impassive smile. A pink tongue flickered from the corners of his upturned mouth.

Before Skallda could connect the figure to a name in his head, Sara let out a short cry. "Flack!"

"An honor that you know me, miss." The little man, called Flack, bowed, then did a backflip to distance himself. "How wonderful! With such a good audience, my performance will be even more refined. Now, let the show begin. First, a greeting from my partners."

Clang! Clang!

The ornaments on the staff in his hand made a clear sound. It gradually became faster and more rhythmic.

Clang, clang, clang, clang...

Ha-Kim's corpse twitched. The uninjured red ninja sat up without a sound. The red ninja that had been sliced in two began to writhe, spilling its guts all over the floor.

Seeing the dead begin to move, Skallda finally remembered what kind of opponent the little man was.

Flack—a monster of the utmost danger, one that his small appearance would never suggest. Flack was not a species but an individual. A mutated monster, a being whose origins were unknown.

Ancient texts described this demon as being able to breathe flames more powerful than any dragon, and to bring corpses to life with an art called "Puppetry." He was also said to possess incredible physical techniques, the very same ones that ninjas were based on, and could unleash a variety of special attacks like poison and petrification. His vitality was also extremely high, and even if killed, he possessed an immortality that allowed him to regenerate in just a few days.

Among the many monsters spoken of in legends, he was a malevolent demon feared as much as an ancient devil.

So a monster like this was also one of Werdna's henchmen.

A shiver, one that Skallda had not felt in a long time since first entering the dungeon, ran through him. That was how deeply the terror of this Flack was ingrained in people's minds.

The headless Ha-Kim slowly stood up. In one hand, he still held a kunai-shaped shuriken tightly. The unharmed red ninja also leaped to his feet with a speed unbefitting a corpse.

At that moment, a gust of wind rushed past Skallda.

!

Flack and the two living corpses were enveloped in a flash of light. It instantly burst, exploding. An immense heat of flames spread across the room.

It was Vulcan's Tiltowait spell.

"We got him!" Jaba yelled.

"Wait! Don't let your guard down—" Before Skallda could finish his sentence, two figures leaped out from the flames.

Scene 19. Flack 2

The ultimate inferno spell, *Tiltowait*, is in a class of its own. It operates on a fundamentally different principle from the other, lower-tier fire spells like *Mahalito* or *Lahalito*.

The source of power for the series of inferno spells is the combustion of the target. Flames multiply in proportion to the caster's magical power, and creatures hit by this attack are destroyed from the outside in. The intense heat carbonizes their outer skin, gradually corrupting them from within.

However, the basic principle of *Tiltowait* is to fuse and split the atomic nuclei at the center of every substance, harnessing the immense energy released by this reaction. It converts the overwhelming power generated by a nuclear reaction into a blazing inferno.

Of course, if atomic nuclei were actually reacted in this space, the resulting energy would be enough to instantly annihilate not only the caster but the entire area. For this reason, the nuclear reaction needed to cast this spell is performed in a different dimension, and only a tiny fraction of that energy is called forth into our reality. A significant amount of energy is lost during the transit between dimensions, but it can still generate superheated flames easily exceeding one thousand degrees, several times more powerful than the *Lahalito* spell, over a wide area.

And from the epicenter, the flames scatter in all directions with tremendous force. The fire, transformed into blades, shatters and incinerates any creature within its kill zone.

It was a spell of alien destructive principles, befitting an ultimate offensive spell.

In front of Skallda and the others, centered in the middle of the antechamber, a wall of fire burned in a circle over ten meters in diameter. This was the result of Vulcan's lightning-fast *Tiltowait* being unleashed upon it.

An ordinary monster would have been carbonized by such an intense blaze in a matter of seconds. Even a Fire Giant, who possesses a high tolerance to heat, could be killed by the sheer shock of being hit by so much fire.

Everyone thought that if Flack were to take this spell head-on, even a formidable demon like him wouldn't be able to escape unharmed.

However, the monster, which had existed for a longer time, had even greater durability within his small body.

Spinning like a wheel, Flack leapt out of the sea of flames. The rotation scattered the sparks and eliminated any further damage from the fire.

Reaching the ceiling, Flack hung there with one hand.

At the same moment, the headless Ha-Kim also shot out of the fire.

The parts of his body not covered by armor were half-carbonized, and the stump of his neck still steamed from the boiling blood left inside his body.

A living being would have long since ceased all life functions.

However, those who become Living Dead by Flack's sorcery will not stop until their skeletons or muscle tissue are completely burned away, or their bodies are severed.

The Red Ninja was scattered by the blast, but his body was almost undamaged thanks to the Armor of Evil, which is said to be virtually indestructible.

The headless corpse moved like an arrow. His speed was not diminished at all from when he was alive. In fact, freed from the inhibitions of consciousness, he pushed his body to the absolute limit of his tendons, making his movements even faster than before. There was not a shred of the stiff, awkward movement characteristic of controlled corpses like zombies.

Gadi's body reacted to Ha-Kim, who was charging at the speed of lightning. The Sword of Kasinart roared as it was brought down on Ha-Kim’s torso.

The blade and armor clashed, and a violent shower of sparks flew.

Ha-Kim's body bent into a V-shape and was sent flying into the flames. He had taken the full force of Gadi's blow, which was like being struck with a log, directly on the abdomen of his armor.

The Sword of Kasinart was an artifact made by forging an extremely hard alloy, a delicate mixture of various metals, to its absolute limit, specifically to destroy armor plating. No matter how much

protective magic was on the armor, a skilled swordsman like Gadi could easily pierce it with a single swing.

And his torso was struck by that very sword. With the momentum of his own charge added to the blow, it wouldn't have been a surprise if Ha-Kim's body had been cut in two.

However, the Armor of Evil—a demonic piece of equipment that brings misfortune to all but those of the Evil order—also had a terrifying defensive ability. With the power of a powerful curse, its armor was hard yet extremely flexible.

Regardless of the damage to the body from the impact, the Armor of Evil itself was not designed to be destroyed.

The headless Ha-Kim was pushed back into the flames, rolling. The fire began to quickly weaken. The spell's effect was fading.

Flack, still on the ceiling, looked down at Skallda and the others, laughing maniacally. "Ha ha ha, what a shame! I was so close to burning you all to death. The warrior's swordsmanship is impressive, but it seems it wasn't enough against my puppet."

Shouting this, Flack swung his body back and forth, and at the perfect moment, launched himself backward. Spinning and rotating, he landed on the other side of the wall of fire.

The magical flames vanished.

On the floor in front of Flack, Ha-Kim lay on his back. A faint smoke rose from the gaps in his armor.

The charred corpse once again began to rise.

The carbonized skin on his upper arms and thighs, which weren't covered by armor, peeled away in pieces. Underneath, his dark red muscle tissue twitched and pulsed.

Even Skallda and his companions, who had fought countless grotesque monsters, were nauseated by the sight of this ugly creature.

And what's more, this was Ha-Kim, a man they had spoken to only moments ago.

A shiver of revulsion ran down Skallda’s spine. Gadi's last blow, even through the armor, had been powerful enough to rupture internal organs. It was a fatal blow that would have instantly killed

any living being.

To stop Ha-Kim, who was still getting up, they would have to completely destroy his body.

But fighting a headless corpse of an enemy was different from fighting a monster. In the face of a situation where he had to swing his sword at the corpse of someone he knew to survive, Skallda felt a mix of anger and intense disgust.

"*Tch*."

Gadi clicked his tongue. A small amount of blood was seeping from his upper arm.

The moment he had struck Ha-Kim, a shuriken, which had shot out like a snake, had sliced his arm. It was a movement too quick for the eye to follow.

"Gadi?" Skallda asked, his eyes still fixed on what was in front of him.

"I'm fine. But this is going to be a lot of trouble. Ha-Kim isn't just an ordinary zombie."

Flack's voice echoed again.

"It's time for the main event. Enjoy the show."

The mouth of Flack's mask stretched into a wide smile.

A gust of air was sucked in from it. A red light began to leak from deep inside his dark throat.

Suddenly, Flack’s body sank. The next moment, he shot into the air as if a spring had been released.

A tremendous inferno rained down upon the party from above.

It was Flack's breath. Flack had unleashed flames even more powerful than *Lahalito*.

In an instant, a blast of fire hundreds of degrees hot slammed into Skallda and his companions. The flames were so intense that they penetrated inside their armor and robes, causing widespread burns.

"*Gah*!"

Skallda shook the sparks off with his shield. If they were hit by this

breath again, a member of the party could die from the burns. They had to immediately switch to a counter-attack.

Clang!

The sound of a staff was heard.

Where's Flack?!

"Up there!" Gadi shouted from beside him.

Skallda looked up, and his eyes caught a shadow crawling across the ceiling.

Holding his staff in his mouth, Flack clung to the ceiling with both hands and feet. He was in a position as if he were on all fours.

His face was looking directly backward. His neck, having rotated 180 degrees, was looking down at the party from above his back.

In that posture, Flack ran across the ceiling, quickly approaching Skallda and the others.

"Ha-Kim's coming again! Skallda, cut him with ki!" Gadi said quickly. "I'll handle Flack. Cut Ha-Kim's body in two!"

At that moment, Flack's body left the ceiling. He spun like a drill as he attacked the party.

But Skallda ignored him and ran toward Ha-Kim, who was crouched and preparing to leap.

Ha-Kim moved with a speed that was impossible for the dead. With the violent expansion and contraction of his muscles, his burned skin, which had lost its flexibility, tore and flew everywhere.

There was no guard, nothing. With his arms wide open, his posture was to grab his opponent at any opening. The one controlling him, Flack, was probably only giving the corpse one command: to end the enemy's life.

That alone made him a terrifying opponent. Since he paid no attention to defense, he would attack in any situation. If you couldn't defeat him in one blow, the opening you created would be a vulnerability he could exploit.

Skallda concentrated his ki as he ran toward Ha-Kim. After two previous battles, he was beginning to get used to this method, even

if only a little.

But the enemy's "Ki," which should have been transmitted to him in proportion to his own concentration, was completely absent from Ha-Kim.

"Ki," as in murderous intent, is a pressure that comes from a person's presence. And one’s presence comes from breathing, which is the source of all life.

In other words, it is nearly impossible to completely erase one's presence as long as one is breathing. Conversely, if an opponent is not breathing, no matter how skilled a person is, they cannot sense their "Ki."

The reason the subjugation party led by Samurai Knacklave had been defeated by an ambush in the past was because the undead monster, a vampire, did not need to breathe, so he gave off no presence at all.

Ha-Kim, having lost his head and become a mere lump of bone and flesh, had no presence. It was impossible to read his movements from his ki like with past enemies.

Ha-Kim was closing in.

Skallda lowered his body and swept his sword in a horizontal line, almost sliding. He aimed for his upper arms, which were not protected by the Armor of Evil.

But the Sword of Kasinart only flashed through empty space. The compressed ki was released from the tip of the sword and vanished.

In a split second, Skallda threw his body to the right. He then kicked off the floor with all his might and jumped sideways, away from the strike.

A kunai held in Ha-Kim's right hand passed so close it touched the side of Skallda's neck.

Ha-Kim had dodged Skallda's sword with a leap, and as he passed overhead, he reached out with his arm to cut his neck.

Skallda felt a cold sweat break out as he instantly regained his balance.

If he hadn't dodged, his head would have fallen off. If he had reacted even a moment later, his carotid artery would have been

severed for sure.

Skallda himself didn't know for certain how he had managed to dodge. He only knew that he had sensed a strange ki and avoided it.

It wasn't Ha-Kim's, of course.

The faint ki was drawing closer again. It was crawling along the ground from behind, where Ha-Kim should have landed.

Skallda turned and delivered a kick barely above the floor.

His armored foot connected with Ha-Kim, who was charging in a beast-like stance. Although it was on the side of his armor, the heavy kick scooped up the hobbit’s light body and sent him flying.

At that moment, something flashed in Skallda's mind.

Headless and with his entire body charred, Ha-Kim had no sensory organs left. The only reason this zombie could pinpoint his opponent's location so accurately was because Flack, who was fighting Gadi and the others right behind him, was controlling him.

The strange ki that preceded Ha-Kim's movements was Flack's telekinesis.

Now that he knew this, it would be easy to predict Ha-Kim's swift movements.

Skallda took a deep breath and began to compress his "Ki." He could now read in advance how Ha-Kim would attack next. All his doubts disappeared, and his entire body was filled with a powerful energy.

Ha-Kim, who had done a somersault in mid-air, leaped at Skallda the moment he landed. His ankles were completely twisted from the forced action. It was a terrifying offensive move only a zombie with no sense of pain could make.

But for Skallda, who had anticipated this, the leaping Ha-Kim was a perfect target.

Ha-Kim, find peace.

Skallda ducked under him and swung his sword from back to front. The ki that had become a blade passed through the Armor of Evil from front to back, vertically piercing Ha-Kim's body.

The Sword of Kasinart itself had not touched the armor at all. Only

the ki had cut through Ha-Kim.

Maintaining his momentum, Ha-Kim passed over Skallda's head. He then tumbled backward and fell to the floor, lying still.

Ha-Kim lay on the ground, flailing his limbs maniacally for a few seconds. He was desperately trying to get up.

Suddenly, as if the puppet strings had been cut, the strength left his limbs. He lay spread-eagled and did not move again.

Inside the undamaged armor, Ha-Kim's corpse was cut in half along his spine. The ki had directly cleaved him in two, unhindered by the armor.

Skallda had not yet realized that this was the same kind of iai—the art of drawing and Kasinart—he had seen from the Samurai Master at his old training hall.

Gadi's left arm was petrified. The arm, still gripping his shield, was completely rigid and wouldn't move.

Flack had hit him with his staff as he fell. It was the terrifying magical power concealed within the strangely shaped staff.

Flack, who was facing him, now had only one arm.

He had taken Gadi’s bait and, the moment he moved to strike his unguarded left arm, had it sliced off at the shoulder by Jaba's sword.

Flack's mask had changed into a face of pure rage. The black holes of his eyes were pulled up, and his mouth was torn open to the same level as his eyes. It was a terrifying expression that would cause a weak-minded person to faint. A frantic, pink tongue, like a flame, writhed and writhed from his wide-open mouth.

He had his arm cut off by these people, who he had looked down on as mere humans. Flack was completely enraged.

“You fiends,”

A word of curse leaked from between his writhing tongue.

“This body has not taken a single wound in two hundred years. How dare you…”

At that moment, an expression of surprise appeared on Flack's face.

Ha-Kim, the one he had been controlling, had been defeated by Skallda.

In that brief opening, Belial's spell was unleashed.

With his elbows pressed against his sides, he began to move his forearms, forming a series of hand signs. The air around him responded, trembling and vibrating.

Roar!

The air vibrations enveloped Flack. He was distorted by an incredible pressure.

This was *Malito*, a spell with the greatest destructive power among the few offensive spells of the priestly magic class. It was a wide-area shattering spell that indirectly pronounced the cursed words of death, said to bring about misfortune just by hearing them, by creating air vibrations around the target, causing physical damage greater than that of *Madalto*.

Inside the resonating space, Flack's body was being struck from all directions. It was as if he was surrounded by an unseen force, continuously punching him.

"*Noo!*" Flack screamed.

Having taken the strongest spells of a wizard and a priest, and having lost an arm to Jaba, even the formidable demon with his immense durability was finally reaching his limit.

Screaming, Flack leaped, squeezing out his last reserves of power.

He was moving with a speed that made you wonder where he had that much strength left. Spinning his staff, he leapt at Jaba.

Just before entering Jaba's range, the staff struck the floor. Using it as a pivot, Flack changed direction in mid-air.

It was a feint. Flack's real target was Gadi, who couldn't use his left arm. The staff was thrust toward Gadi's neck.

But Gadi had already read his move.

He swung his sword to deflect the staff, and then, with a backhand slice, he struck Flack's side. The blade slid under the jester's clothes, and he could feel the satisfying resistance of slicing through the flexible flesh.

As Gadi's sword gouged him, blinding green light shot from all the wounds on Flack's body.

The light overflowed not only from the stump of his arm but also from his eye sockets and mouth, which led to his insides. It was as if an explosion were happening in the center of his body.

"*Gaahh!*"

With a lingering shriek, Flack's body was enveloped in a flash.

When the green light disappeared, Flack was gone. As if it had all been a phantom from the beginning, neither his staff nor his jester's clothes remained.

Something small moved at Gadi's feet.

It was a pink piece of flesh about ten centimeters long. The glistening, wet lump of flesh writhed and twitched.

It was Flack's tongue. Only it had not disappeared, and it was crawling along the ground like a slug.

It wasn't twitching. It had a will of its own and was desperately trying to move away from Gadi.

This was Flack's true body. The form of Flack itself had been nothing more than specialized cells created by the tongue. The tongue-like mass of flesh was his brain and his heart.

Just as Gadi tried to stab it with his sword, it vanished as if it had seeped into the floor. It had transferred to another dimension.

As long as his true body was safe, Flack would eventually revive. But not now.

The party had triumphed over the legendary demon.

Scene 20. Teleporter

Sara relaxed the tension in her arms, which she had spread wide to cast *Madalto*.

Other than the party, nothing else in the chamber moved. Severed from its body by Skallda and having lost its master, the Zombie Master, Ha-Kim's body showed no sign of stirring anymore. It was a burnt, unsightly corpse.

Sara suddenly let her guard down.

Instantly, a dull pain shot through her entire body. It was the pain of the burns she had sustained from the flame that Flack had spat out.

Thanks to the *Mabalfic* spell that Belial had cast when they entered the labyrinth, a transparent magical barrier now encased the bodies of all party members. This had the same effect as being entirely covered in leather armor, serving to soften the impact of a monster's claws or fangs and to a certain degree, alleviate the damage from spells.

Because of this, she didn't have to worry about her skin being charred like Ha-Kim's corpse, but she couldn't escape the physical exhaustion from the intense heat and a slight burn.

A wizard, who rarely suffers from sword wounds, is particularly sensitive to pain. For Sara, the pain felt unbearable.

Her legs gave way, and her consciousness rapidly faded.

I'm going to fall.

Just as she thought that, a strong arm lifted her around the waist. Her fading consciousness returned.

When she opened her eyes, a familiar face was looking down at her.

It was Skallda. Skallda, who had certainly been beyond Ha-Kim's corpse just moments before she let her guard down, was now supporting her in his arms.

"You're awake?"

"Yes. Looks like I was about to lie down on the floor."

Sara offered a weak smile.

"Don't push yourself. Belial, a healing spell, please."

"Hmm. It appears Sara took the worst of the flame."

Belial held his right hand up to Sara's chest and began to chant a spell. In rhythm with his chanting, his left hand traced a complex pattern. Within seconds, his right palm began to glow with a warm light.

The pain from the burns melted away. This was Diaruma, the Great Cure spell, a fifth-level Cleric spell that boasts the greatest effect among all spells that heal injuries and restore vitality.

Sara's body was rapidly revitalized. The burns barely hurt anymore.

Belial finished his chant.

"How do you feel? I can also cast *Dios* if you'd like."

"No, I'm fine now. You also gave me *Latumorfis* this morning. I've been quite a burden on you today."

With that, Sara gave a light wink.

"If you have that much energy, there's nothing to worry about."

Belial nodded and turned his gaze to Gadi behind him. "Next, we'll have to do something about Gadi's arm."

Catching Belial's retreating figure out of the corner of her eye, Sara looked at Skallda, who was still holding her.

Skallda, who had been sending a worried glance toward Gadi, who was crouched at the front of the party, finally noticed her gaze.

"What is it?"

"I'm just wondering how you managed to get here and catch me before I fell."

Sara pointed to the back of the chamber.

At the tip of her finger lay Ha-Kim's corpse. It was the spot where Skallda had been standing moments before.

"That's fifteen meters away. There's no way you could have made it in time if you had only started running when I lost consciousness."

"True. But you're full of questions the moment you get better?"

Skallda said, looking half-exasperated.

"A wizard's code of conduct is the satisfaction of their intellectual curiosity. At this distance, the only explanation is that you either used a Marrol, Teleport spell—which is impossible on this level—or you started running a few seconds before I began to fall. Answer me."

At Sara's serious look, Skallda shook his head in resignation.

"You're right. I started running a little before you couldn't bear the pain of the burns."

"Why?"

"Because I knew you were going to fall."

Seeing Sara's confused expression, Skallda continued. "A samurai can read others' ki. At that moment, I felt your ki as you began to suffer from the pain. I felt you were in danger, so I ran, and sure enough, your body began to give out."

"Does that mean you can read what others are thinking?"

Sara asked, looking slightly flustered.

"I'm still not entirely sure, but it doesn't seem to be that. It's just a matter of knowing what the other person is about to do, a tiny bit before they do it. And I have to focus my own ki for their ki to be transmitted to me."

"I see."

For a moment, Sara's expression looked relieved. "So, do you know what I'm about to do right now?"

"*Huh?*"

In Skallda's mind, Sara's ki transmitted the intent to pry his arm, which had been around her waist for quite some time, off of her.

He had completely forgotten that Sara was already standing on her own two feet while he was still supporting her body. Skallda hastily let go of her.

"Ah, sorry! I didn't mean anything by it—"

Skallda fell silent under Sara's suspicious gaze. Any excuse would only sound worse now.

However, contrary to his expectation, Sara smiled and turned around.

"Looks like it's true that you can't read my mind."

"?"

"My honest feeling was that I wanted you to keep holding me."

"Wha—"

This time, Skallda was so surprised that his voice caught in his throat. Sara stuck out her tongue slightly and looked back.

"Just kidding. I think I'll be able to tease you with this for a while. But really, thank you for saving me from a dangerous situation."

With a soft laugh, Sara left the dumbfounded Skallda and walked toward Gadi and Belial.

A misshapen black lump of metal lay on the floor in front of Gadi.

He hadn't noticed it at all while fighting Flack. It had only entered his field of vision by chance when he was following Flack's main body as it crawled across the floor.

It was a flattened steel plate, about fifteen centimeters in diameter. The floor was blackened by Vulcan's Tiltowait, so if one wasn't paying close attention, one wouldn't even know it was there.

Gadi crouched down to pick it up. The base of his left arm, which had stiffened from muscle cramps, hurt intensely, but he paid it no mind and reached for the lump of metal.

Because it had been roasted by the intense heat of the flame, it was still very hot. Even through his gauntlet, the heat felt as though he had touched a living thing.

Just as he grabbed it, the shield he was still holding in his left hand touched the ground and twisted.

An unbelievable, sharp pain shot through Gadi's nerves. He let out a silent cry and instinctively dropped the lump of metal.

The metal lump flipped over.

There were white teeth. Several broken teeth were stuck into the steel plate.

At that moment, Belial, who had finished healing Sara, approached.

"You really did something reckless. Intentionally taking Flack's attack is not something a sane person would do. According to legend, you are lucky that it only resulted in petrification. —What's wrong? Let me see it."

Seeing that Gadi didn't seem to notice him, Belial peered at his hands.

He saw the pure white teeth embedded in the metal lump. Belial was familiar with that whiteness.

"This is..."

"Gogleg's faceplate. It's so badly crushed, it doesn't look like it," Gadi muttered, averting his gaze from it. "It probably came off before he was sucked into the Demon World."

His tone carried a hint of sadness.

After a moment, Belial spoke.

"May I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

Gadi looked up.

"It's about you and Gogleg. I didn't ask before because you never said anything, but now that Gogleg is no longer in this world, I must ask."

"It's been bothering you, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

Belial was asking about Gadi and Gogleg's connection.

Belial had been on a pilgrimage for several years when he joined this labyrinth-exploring party about a year ago. At the same time, Gadi had drifted into the castle town and became comrades with Skallda and the others, including Silver, who had been living in retirement in the city.

Gogleg arrived less than a month later.

Many prominent parties approached Gogleg, who boasted an abnormally large physique for a dwarf. However, Gogleg unhesitatingly offered to join the ill-reputed Ha-Kim's party.

Some who were rejected got angry and attacked Gogleg in a tavern. This evil and short-tempered warrior was feared alongside Ha-Kim, but he retired from adventuring that very day. Gogleg had broken both of his arms and legs with his bare hands.

From the moment Gogleg arrived, the person he had an unusual fighting spirit toward was Gadi.

If he had been aiming for the title of the best warrior among adventurers, there was also Skallda, who possessed an equal or greater power. But Gogleg's eyes were always fixed on Gadi.

Everyone had a vague idea that there was some reason for this, but since Gadi himself said nothing, no one dared to ask. Besides, Gadi was the type of person who didn't talk much unless it was necessary.

"He intended to have a duel with me."

"What?"

Belial cried out in surprise. A duel meant a no-holds-barred, serious fight. If two warriors like Gadi were to clash, one of them would surely lose their life.

"It was supposed to happen when he reached master level. It could have happened as early as tomorrow."

"Why such a foolish thing? I say this as a cleric, but no matter how much magic can resurrect the dead, it's foolish to belittle one's own life, especially in a duel."

Belial forgot about healing Gadi and ranted on.

"He had a reason that couldn't be appeased any other way."

Gadi looked down at the faceplate on the floor and then stood up. "You know about the party that fought Werdna and returned, right?"

"Yes. It was a story from a little before you came to this city, back when I was still a traveling monk and not an adventurer. If I recall correctly, it was led by a dwarf who had performed many great deeds in the northern war."

Belial furrowed his brow in confusion. "Why are you bringing that up?"

"The man was drained of several levels of energy by vampires and died shortly after returning to the city," Gadi continued. "I had met that party on their way here while I was traveling. We happened to have an impromptu match for a really stupid reason. Of course, it wasn't a serious duel, but somehow, I won."

"Against a level 12 warrior?"

"Yes. And that's what was bad about it. The story got exaggerated and spread to the northern country, and it was said that the dwarf had been severely injured in the match. And then, his party was wiped out in the labyrinth."

"So they thought he was at a disadvantage because of the injury he sustained from fighting you."

"Exactly. And that dwarf was Gogleg's older brother."

"So that's it," Belial said with a look of understanding. "So he saw you as his brother's enemy."

But Gadi shook his head.

"No, that's not it. His goal was to surpass his brother, a hero. In other words, he wanted to defeat me, the one who had defeated his brother."

"Either way, it was no good for you."

"Yeah, but I didn't dislike Gogleg."

"Why not?"

Sara had come over without them noticing. It seemed she had been listening to the conversation halfway through.

"For him, fighting in this labyrinth wasn't just a means to get a reward by joining Trebor's Royal Guard; it was a way to hone his skills. I have a soft spot for people like that."

With that, Gadi glanced back at Skallda. Skallda was still in a daze, seemingly not noticing that Alheim and Rasha had entered from the door behind him and were breaking camp.

"What's up with him? He looks like he's under the influence of a

Kateino, Sleep spell."

"I don't know," Sara feigned ignorance.

Rasha ran past them in a hurry. She was excitedly heading toward Jaba, who was searching for treasure at the back of the chamber.

With a slow pace, Alheim, wearing his usual smile, approached.

"A brilliant performance. To get away with so little damage against that Flack. Although, you'll need a *Madi* spell for that petrified arm."

"Then why don't you heal him as atonement for the trap from earlier? We plan to go further, but you're probably heading back to the surface. Thanks to those huge spiders, Vulcan and I ended up using up all our third-level spells," Sara said, her voice laced with anger. She was quite upset, having been threatened at the tavern and then having a trap set for her.

"Oh, you used a *Mahalito* and a *Molito* on that swarm of spiders. I'd love to know how you did that. But I don't know anything about a trap. Maybe the spiders just gathered after you passed by?"

Alheim seemed intent on playing dumb.

"Besides, if you guys were to be wiped out because you ran out of *Madi* spells, I would still have a chance to go after Werdna's head."

"Shut up. We don't need help from an incompetent like you. Get lost."

Belial glared at Alheim.

Madi, a sixth-level Cleric spell, was the only spell that could cure petrification, a high-level form of paralysis. It also had the effect of instantly restoring vitality to someone in a near-death state. It was one of the most reliable spells in this deepest level, where powerful monsters roamed, but even for a level 13 Belial, the number of times he could use a sixth-level spell was less than five, so it was a magic level he wanted to conserve as much as possible.

"I'll go without you telling me. I have to find a new party as soon as possible."

Alheim averted his eyes from Belial and looked toward the back of the room.

There were Jaba and Rasha, who were examining a treasure chest hidden in the wall, and Vulcan, who was crouched in front of Ha-Kim's corpse.

"He's got his eyes on Vulcan," Sara said.

"Go ahead and poach him. It looks like he's not getting along with Skallda anyway."

"It seems that way," Alheim muttered.

At that moment, Jaba let out a short cry.

Gravity vanished.

There was a large recess in the wall. A human-sized creature could easily hide in it.

A sturdy-looking chest, about a meter wide, was placed there.

It was the treasure chest where the monster guarding this chamber stored its treasures. A padlock was affixed to the lid, and it didn't look like it would open easily without a key.

Jaba cautiously approached the chest while peering into the recess.

All monsters released into the labyrinth as Werdna's guards were sent from other locations by some means. Creatures that only inhabit the frozen wastes or blistering hot lands, including the denizens of the sealed underground, would appear one after another as if they were bubbling up from the depths of the labyrinth.

Among these monsters, summoned from places where even birds don't go, some carried magic items created with lost techniques. It was unknown whether they were stripped from adventurers who had wandered into those lands and died, or if they had inherited the legacy of ancient kingdoms ruled by powerful magic. Whatever the case, items far superior to those currently being manufactured were brought into the labyrinth by these monsters.

In places like this deepest level, where the chambers functioned as guard posts, a treasure chest was almost guaranteed to be hidden. Ha-Kim's Armor of Evil and Skallda's Cuisinart Sword were also items that had been obtained from these treasure chests.

Most of the treasure chests had, in addition to a regular lock, complex traps to deter others from opening them. These included

poison needles that shot out, an Exploding Box that burst over a wide area, and a Teleporter trap.

The Teleporter trap was especially dangerous. The moment you failed to disarm it, the Marrol, Teleport spell would activate, and the party would instantly be teleported somewhere else in the labyrinth.

If you were unlucky, you could materialize inside a thick rock wall, a trap that could mean you'd be stuck forever.

In addition to these, a number of other traps had been identified that could put a party in a dangerous situation if they were carelessly activated, such as the Blaster, a poisonous wind that reacted to a spellcaster's magical power and caused paralysis.

If you left the box alone, you wouldn't have to worry about triggering a trap, but you also wouldn't get your hands on any powerful items.

This is where the thief came in.

A thief had almost no attacking power in combat. The only weapon they could handle was a dagger, and unless they changed classes from another profession, they couldn't use magic either.

However, when faced with a treasure chest, their sharp eyes and intuition could spot cleverly hidden traps, and their delicate fingertips could effortlessly disarm the multiple triggers.

The only other ones who had a sense for disarming traps were high-level ninjas, but even they couldn't come close to a thief's skill. The reason why almost every adventurer party had a thief was that there was no way to get treasure without this ability.

Jaba was said to be the best thief among adventurers when it came to disarming traps. In fact, the last time he had triggered a trap was about two months ago with a poison needle, and since then, up until yesterday, he had successfully disarmed traps almost a hundred times in a row.

But Jaba had not yet realized that his fingertip sensitivity had significantly diminished the moment he became a ninja.

There was nothing hidden in the recess. Jaba knelt in front of the chest and began to examine the keyhole and the seams of the lid without touching the chest at all.

This box had been empty during their exploration two days ago. If there were no traps, it was probably empty today as well.

However, a total of three threads were stretched inside, including deep within the keyhole. It was a relatively simple trap using hair. If someone didn't notice it and tried to open the lid, the hair tied to the lid would pull the trap's trigger. All he had to do to disarm it was cut the threads.

This kind of trap is probably a Teleporter trap, but it's no big deal. It'd be dangerous if I didn't notice the hair, but a contraption like this seems unlikely to even work.

Jaba took out his trusty pick from his thief days and immediately went to work.

The pick, with a wire attached to the end of the grip, easily slid into the gap with the lid, and its flattened, sharpened blade-like tip cut the first thread.

When he moved the pick to cut the second one, Jaba felt a slight tremor in his fingertips.

Something's wrong.

"You did it! You defeated Flack!"

Rasha's voice suddenly rang out from nearby. He had been so focused on the trap that he hadn't noticed her footsteps approaching.

His finger slipped. But luckily, the pick cut the second thread.

Jaba let out a long breath.

"You idiot! You almost activated the trap!!"

"Oh, sorry."

Jaba nudged the now-silent Rasha and inserted the wire into the keyhole to cut the last thread.

Unlike the first two, the thread visible deep inside the hole had to be cut with a thrusting motion. But for Jaba, it was a ridiculously easy task.

Aiming, Jaba slowly inserted the pick.

He thought he had cut it. A moment later, the lid flew open at an

incredible speed.

"Damn it! The Teleporter—"

Jaba's cry was swallowed by the flash of light that erupted from the box. His feet left the floor, and his sense of up and down vanished. In a daze, Jaba desperately grabbed Rasha's hand.

With the light, the eight figures vanished from the chamber.

Scene 21. Capture

Level one of the subterranean labyrinth.

In a small dark room, an old elf was engrossed in a book. Piles of books were stacked on both sides of the desk. The old elf closed the book he was holding, placed it on top of the pile on one end, and took a new one from the other. The slightly taller stack was apparently the pile of books he had yet to examine.

In the center of the desk, a silver mirror with an intricately carved frame was propped up. It hadn't been on the desk when Skallda and the others had visited this morning.

Reflected in the polished mirror was the city on the surface, shrouded in darkness.

It was still too early to be called evening. However, the black clouds that had begun to cover the city's skies since midday had grown even thicker and now completely blocked out the sunlight.

The old elf paused, resting the hand that had been turning the pages, and shifted his gaze to the dark, fortress-like city reflected in the magic mirror.

The mirror showed a bustling main street lined with various shops. The street leading to the South Gate was usually packed with street vendors and teeming with customers, but today, there were hardly any people out. If you didn't know about the clouds in the sky, you'd mistake the scene for the dead of night.

The old elf muttered a low incantation.

Instantly, the image switched to the plaza in front of the Cant Temple. The viewpoint rose, appearing as though he was looking down from the high roof of the temple.

Clicking his tongue, the old elf continued his spell. The mirror's image changed rapidly, showing the city from various viewpoints.

He returned to the main street view, and then to the high viewpoint above the Cant Temple, where the spell was interrupted. The image became fixed.

"I should have added more viewpoints," the old elf murmured to himself.

Compared to crystal balls, the magic mirror was a convenient item that didn't require much preparation and could easily form an image. By placing a small silver disc at the desired location, the mirror would always show the scene through it. The old elf, who rarely ventured to the surface, had buried these silver discs throughout the city and used the mirror as his eyes on the surface.

However, since it consumed so little magical power, the places he could scry were limited to the locations of the silver discs. There was no freedom.

Out of the twenty-something available viewpoints, the old elf had yet to find the information he sought.

The old elf looked at the book at the bottom of the pile of books he had already checked, the one he had examined first.

It was a registry containing the names of all those who had become master-level wizards from the first page until the present day. This registry would self-replicate through magical power, and every time a wizard who had mastered a level-7 spell was born, their name would automatically be inscribed. It contained the names of Silver, the old elf's true name, and Werdna, among others.

However, the name of the man Skallda and the others had just taken as a new companion—Vulcan—was nowhere to be found in the registry.

This was an impossible situation. No matter what power a spellcaster possessed, they could not seal the powerful ancient magic placed on this book.

"Between that magical cloud and Vulcan, there are only inexplicable things," he said, and as the old elf went to open the book again, his eyes turned to the door in front of him.

In the darkness of the dark zone, separated by the door, he sensed someone's presence.

"Who's there!?"

There was no answer. Then, the door slowly opened.

The old elf began to chant the Counter-Teleport spell, Mapiroh Mahamadiromato. He had decided to summarily cast any adventurer who entered his room without stating their name or business back to the surface.

From the dense wall of darkness, a person wrapped entirely in a robe emerged.

It was a strange figure with a hidden head. It wasn't the kind of outfit an adventurer would wear.

"How impatient," the figure muttered as the door closed. It was a man's voice.

The elf's chant stopped. The voice was muffled by the hood, but he recognized it.

The man continued. "Fifty years ago, you—Hastalgar—and Werdna revived an ancient magical art. A portion of it has finally been deciphered. That cloud is precisely a magical cloud created by its use."

"You are—" As if in response to the elf's question, the man pulled back his hood. His face was illuminated by the light of the lamp.

The old elf gasped.

Gadi finally felt the weight of his body return.

It felt like an awfully long time had passed since Jaba had triggered the Teleporter trap on the treasure chest. However, it was, in reality, only the blink of an eye.

Gadi's body materialized.

He felt the sensation of a hard floor under his feet. At the very least, he seemed to have avoided being teleported into a solid rock formation.

His vision began to recover rapidly. At the same time, the pain from his petrified left arm made his consciousness clear.

Belial was standing in front of him. He was still shaking his head, as if his senses were still in disarray.

There were no other presences.

Gadi looked around, but the light from the lamp only faintly illuminated the nearby floor, and the surroundings were shrouded in deep darkness. It seemed they had materialized near the center of a room, not a corridor.

"Where are we?" Belial asked, swaying.

"Looks like one of the inner rooms. Jaba got us into a trap again after all this time."

"A Teleporter trap, you say... What about the others?"

Belial finally seemed to regain his senses and stopped shaking his head.

"It's just the two of us here. It looks like we got scattered."

"Are you sure?"

A surprised Belial looked around. However, all he could see was darkness.

Belial's surprise was understandable. A Teleporter trap, like the Teleport spell, was meant to instantly move all six party members at once. It was usually inconceivable for a party to be dispersed.

"It was probably a bad idea for there to be eight of us in that room, with Alheim and Rasha. I hope everyone's okay."

"Yes. In any case, it's dangerous for just the two of us. Let's figure out which room this is and return to the starting point of this level in the teleport zone. If Skallda and the others are safe, they'll surely come there."

"Before that, my arm needs to be healed."

The moment he was about to say "please," Gadi felt a tremendous surge of demonic energy from behind him.

A chill ran down his spine, as if his heart had been seized and was being crushed. It was a feeling of dread that Gadi had never experienced before, a terror from the depths of his soul.

Gadi spun around as if he had been shot. The pain in his left shoulder didn't bother him.

Something was moving in the depths of the dark. It glowed faintly purple, so much that it was indistinguishable from the darkness unless one had extremely sensitive eyes.

It was like mist. A purple mist solidified about ten meters away.

Suddenly, it began to take a human form.

"What is that!?"

At that moment, Belial let out a short cry from behind.

Gadi quickly tried to turn around. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Belial standing stock-still.

But he couldn't turn any further. Something sharp was pressed against the back of Gadi's neck.

It was an incredibly long, crimson claw. The claw was pressed against the skin directly above Gadi's carotid artery, lightly indenting it. A little more pressure would be enough to draw blood.

There should have been no sign of an enemy.

"Don't move," a deep male voice resonated from the ceiling.

"If you move, your life and the life of that priest there are forfeit."

The claw was extending from the ceiling.

With Gadi's reflexes, he could jump back before the claw could inflict a fatal wound. Since he had slightly crouched the moment he felt the demonic energy behind him, he was ready to push off the floor in a single motion.

However, it seemed that Belial had already been paralyzed. Even if Gadi dodged the attack and regained his footing, he wouldn't be able to save Belial.

Gadi also realized that they were surrounded. Although there was no presence, he could hear the sounds of at least five enemies moving around.

In the darkness, pairs of crimson eyes flickered. For a moment, one of them crossed into the light of the lamp. Its head was illuminated in the faint light.

It was a pale face, similar to a human's.

From its wide-open mouth, unnaturally developed fangs were visible. The blood-red eyes could not have belonged to a human or an elf.

It was a vampire, a type of high-class humanoid monster belonging to the undead. A formidable monster, it was capable of moving with an un-undead like speed and possessed sharp claws that could instantly paralyze even the hardened body of a high-level warrior with their venom, as well as an energy drain ability that could suck

out life force equivalent to a level-2 spell.

And there were at least five of these vampires. Even Gadi, lauded as the strongest warrior among adventurers, could, at best, only take on one. On top of that, his left arm was petrified.

The enemy on the ceiling was also skilled. Although Gadi could sense enemies from even the slightest air currents when he was focused, let alone when he was relaxed, the feat of pressing a claw against him without his notice was not something just anyone could accomplish.

The demonic energy from the mist was also growing stronger. He wanted to turn around, but he couldn't move.

It was a truly desperate situation.

"Don't get any foolish ideas. If I wanted to kill you, I could do it right now."

"Then why not? Are you going to use us as food for your vampire minions?" Gadi said, only moving his eyes to look at the figure above him.

The unseen opponent seemed to laugh.

"That's an interesting idea, but I'll keep you alive for now. I need your mind to be working."

A vampire approached from behind. Gadi's body twitched.

"If you resist, I'll kill the priest first," the voice from the ceiling said, and Gadi's body stiffened. He would have preferred to fight and die rather than surrender to vampires, but Belial's life was also at stake. There was no longer any way to defy them.

The vampire's claw lightly stabbed his right arm. Instantly, all feeling in his right arm disappeared. It was a localized paralysis. With this, Gadi was as good as having both his arms severed.

The claw on his neck was pulled upward.

Gadi looked at the ceiling.

At that moment, the figure detached from the ceiling where it had been hanging upside down. Its cloak rustled. It did a half-somersault in midair and landed in front of Gadi.

It was a tall man with golden hair. He was dressed in a dark blue outfit, like a royal or noble's ceremonial attire, which was utterly out of place in this subterranean realm.

He had a terrifyingly beautiful face. If perfect beauty existed in this world, it would be exactly this.

The man's eyes were also the color of blood. Between his slightly parted lips, two pointed fangs were visible.

"I was going to come looking for you, but you've saved me the trouble."

A faint smile appeared on the man's expressionless face.

"I am the Vampire King, the Vampire Lord. Welcome to the abode of our master."

The surroundings brightened. The candelabras on the walls were all lit at once.

Gadi realized the true nature of the demonic energy.

"Werdna—"

Gadi turned around, and his eyes caught sight of a throne illuminated by the dim light of the candles. It was where the mist had been condensed just moments ago.

A man was sitting on a luxurious throne decorated with crystals, gold, silver, and obsidian. He was wearing a flowing purple robe, and a long beard extended all the way to his feet. His face was not clearly visible because he was looking down, but there was no doubt that he was an elderly man.

This was Werdna, just as the rumors had described him.

Gadi and Belial had been teleported into Werdna's chamber.

Six vampires surrounded the two of them. Belial, a priest and their natural enemy, had been instantly paralyzed by the Vampire Lord.

There was now not even a one in a ten thousand chance of a counterattack.

Two vampires forcefully turned Gadi around. The throne of Werdna was out of his sight.

"Now," the Vampire Lord extended his right arm and pointed his

fingertips at Gadi. "It's time for you to answer my questions."

"What—"

Kikik.

Suddenly, a bat flew off the ceiling. It circled Gadi two or three times before landing on the Vampire Lord's shoulder. It was a black vampire bat twice the size of a normal one.

"One of my minions reported to me," the Vampire Lord said. "I heard that there is a strange person in your party."

Vulcan, he must mean.

Gadi realized that the vampires were keeping him alive to get information about Vulcan.

"Don't know. A lot of my companions are strange."

All Gadi could do now was try to buy time. If he spoke carelessly, he and Belial would both become monster food.

"*Hmph*," the Vampire Lord's red eyes narrowed slightly.

"It's rare for someone to talk so insolently when facing us."

The claw pointed at Gadi instantly grew nearly a meter long. The glowing red tip stopped just in front of Gadi's eye.

Gadi didn't close his eyes. He glared straight at the Vampire Lord through the claw.

The Vampire Lord's lips curled up in amusement.

"Let's see how long that stubbornness of yours lasts."

Poisonous liquid sprayed from the tip of the claw.

With a stinging pain, Gadi's vision was consumed by darkness.

Act III

Scene 22. Skallda

Skallda's hometown was in a deep forest, far to the west.

He had no memories of his parents. From the time he was old enough to know better, he lived with his grandfather, a woodsman, in a hut deep in the forest.

The nearest town was half a day's journey away. Until he was eight and his grandfather took him to that town, Skallda had never seen another human, or an Elf or Dwarf for that matter.

Skallda loved the forest. He loved the trees and the animals that lived there. He spent the better part of his day running through the woods and playing with the animals.

From the year he was first taken to town, his grandfather began to make Skallda accompany him on his trips. However, Skallda hated it.

To his young mind, the bustling town felt as though it were dead. It was nothing but noise and lacked the gentleness of the forest. There were no whispering trees or laughing animals to be heard if he listened closely.

His grandfather seemed to have noticed Skallda's feelings, but he still took him to town once every six months to help with the shopping.

Time passed. Skallda turned fifteen and grew strong, but oddly enough, his grandfather never had him help with the logging work.

That winter, his grandfather died of old age. On a cold morning, he lay on his bed, as still and cold as if he were sleeping.

The night before, his grandfather had called for Skallda.

"Skallda, do you still love the forest?"

"Yes."

"I don't have much time left. What will you do when I'm gone?"

"I'm not sure," Skallda replied with a serious expression.

If he could, he would have liked to continue living in the forest. But he had no knowledge or experience as a woodsman. And although

he loved his grandfather, he felt no appeal in the work of Kasinart down trees.

"The forest favors you. You could probably manage to live here. But that's no good."

"Why not?"

"The forest and that small town aren't everything. You must go out into the wider world and search for something precious to protect."

"Something to protect?"

"That's right. One who has it will become much stronger than one who doesn't. It will give you the power to survive in this world."

His grandfather's eyes suddenly became distant. "Your father had it. He died before me, his father, but he had no regrets in his life, I'm sure of it."

"My father..."

"Listen, Skallda. Leave the forest and go on a journey. And find your own way of life."

These became his grandfather's last words.

The next day, as soon as he had finished the burial, Skallda packed his bags and left that same day.

For more than half a year, Skallda's wandering journey continued. During that time, he learned many things he could never have known living only with his grandfather. The desolate coastlines, the beautiful countryside, the massive citadels and the nobles who lived in them, the wonder and terror of a Spell-User's magic, and the encounters and partings with people—everything he experienced gradually transformed the boy he was into a young man. He also learned that his body, honed by running through the forest every day, could withstand a fair amount of rough work.

Could this be it? Skallda thought. Was the precious thing his grandfather had spoken of the ability to gain a power that no one could defeat?

Around that time, news of the Werdna subjugation reached Skallda's ears. Until then, training facilities only available to those in the military were being opened up, and anyone registered as an adventurer could receive the basic training necessary to become a

warrior or a wizard. Furthermore, it was rumored that if you defeated Werdna, you could join the nobility as a member of the Royal Guard.

He immediately headed for Trebor's domain and entered the citadel city.

The results of the ability test he took at the registration office on the outskirts of the city showed that Skallda had the potential to become either a warrior or a thief, but he chose to be a warrior without hesitation.

Unlike a Class Change, those who take on one of these Classes for the first time have no habits from other Classes. Skallda was able to learn the basics of a warrior without much trouble. Although it had not been a month since the Werdna subjugation by adventurers began, many people had gathered in the city. Thanks to this, he found party members that very night.

Two of them had registered just that day, like Skallda. One was a man named Jaba, who had been tested a few people before Skallda. He was rejected as a warrior aspirant, and after a big fuss, he settled for a thief.

The other was a beautiful wizard girl named Sara, who claimed to be the apprentice of a famous sorcerer.

One year had passed since they began training in the labyrinth. The party members changed frequently, but Skallda, Jaba, and Sara always stayed together. Eventually, Belial and Silver joined, and then Gadi became a companion.

Gaining experience through incessant battles with monsters, Skallda's skill improved with each passing day.

For Skallda, even Werdna was just one of the enemies he had to defeat someday. There was only one reason for him to keep fighting: to win the battle.

He still had no idea what he was fighting for.

Someone vigorously shook his shoulder, and Skallda woke up.

He felt a hard floor against his back. It seemed he had collapsed and passed out.

In front of him, he saw Alheim's face, still with a faint smirk.

"You've finally woken up."

"What happened... Where is this?"

Shaking off his groggy consciousness, Skallda pushed himself up.

Beside him, Sara was lying unconscious.

"Sara!"

Skallda jumped to his feet and quickly scooped up Sara.

"Don't worry. She's just passed out, same as you."

Alheim said quietly.

Sara regained consciousness.

"...Did I pass out again?"

"Doesn't look like it. Can you stand?"

Remembering what happened earlier, Skallda hurriedly tried to distance himself from Sara.

"No, I can't stand."

"Liar."

"You can tell?"

"I can."

"Too bad. Can't tease you then."

"This is no time for fooling around, you two," Alheim said, losing his patience.

"It seems we've been scattered, all thanks to Jaba triggering a Teleporter trap."

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, huh."

Skallda helped Sara to her feet and looked around.

They were somewhere in the underground passages.

"This looks familiar."

"It's probably the Sixth Underground Passage," Sara mumbled.

If her memory was correct, this was the passage just before the

Seventh Area, where Werdna's throne room was located. At the end of this passage was a translocation zone that led to the Seventh Underground Passage.

It was a place Skallda and his party had walked through several times.

"I'm a real mess being dragged into this. I was on my way back to the surface, and now I've been sent to a place like this. Who was it that said he was the best at disarming traps in the citadel city, I wonder?"

"You're secretly happy, aren't you? If one of our party members were to go missing, that would be exactly what you want."

"No one in this city wishes for the well-being of other parties. Not even a Good one."

Alheim smiled menacingly.

"All you have are party members and enemies."

"What about now?"

Skallda said. "Either way, if we're going back to the surface, we have to deal with the guards in the room ahead. Are you our enemy, or our ally?"

"I'll form a party with you, if you don't mind. I'm not overconfident enough to walk the lowest level alone."

"It's settled. Okay, Sara?" Skallda said, as if trying to convince the displeased-looking Sara.

"I guess there's no choice. It's dangerous enough with just the three of us."

She sounded grumpy. It was no wonder, since she was stuck with Alheim of all people.

"Alheim, how long were we out?"

"I'd say about four or five minutes."

"Alright, let's hurry. If everyone is safe, they should be at the starting point of this level. If we're too late, they might come looking for us."

"Worrying about others first is a luxury. When we might die at any

moment."

Alheim shrugged.

"If my Alignment was Evil, my own well-being would come first, and I would never go looking for my companions."

The three of them began to move towards the throne room.

This Sixth Underground Passage was significantly shorter than the other areas. Skallda and his companions soon reached the door of the throne room.

The appearance of the door was no different from the first throne room.

Skallda stopped and signaled to the two with his eyes.

Let's go.

Sara nodded, and Alheim silently twisted the corner of his lips.

Skallda kicked the door open with a single, swift motion.

In the dim throne room, a group of guards stood no more than ten meters from the door. They all turned to face Skallda at once.

They were six humans in greenish robes.

A squad of Mages whom Werdna had granted the magical power to use spells up to Level 5.

They seemed to have originally been a group of ruffians gathered from somewhere. They lacked the intelligence of a true wizard, but with the power of the cursed robes Werdna had given them, they could cast spells of the Madalt class. If even one of them was not taken down, there was a risk of suffering a major blow.

The Mages' reaction was surprisingly quick. As soon as they saw Skallda and his companions burst into the room, they began to chant their spells without a moment's delay.

Sara's *Madalto* was slightly behind.

Damn!

Skallda knew instinctively that four of the enemies would finish chanting their spells before Sara could. Even if he cut one of them down, three Madalt spells would rain down on them.

Skallda could probably take it, but Sara, a wizard with less stamina, would not.

Their only hope was Alheim's support spell.

When facing numerous enemies like Mages who have powerful offensive magic but are physically weak, the standard tactic for a cleric is to cast Montino, a spell that seals the enemy's spells. While the Montino spell itself has no lethal effect, once the spells are sealed, Mages who can't even handle a sword have a combat strength less than that of even an Orc.

If Alheim could cast this spell first, the tide of the battle would turn.

Skallda's mind was racing in the instant he sprinted toward the enemy group.

At that moment, a low growl erupted from behind him. Alheim's spell had taken effect.

However, it was not the spell Montino.

A fierce gust of wind passed by Skallda.

What is that?

The air in front of him was swirling violently. The vortex enveloped the Mages who were just about to finish their chant.

Skallda had stopped running.

The space in front of his eyes was stained with fresh blood. The six robes were torn apart, and the gushing blood turned into a vortex in the air.

It was *Rolt*, a Level 6 cleric spell. It was a spell that created a vortex of air at an incredibly high speed, forming vacuum blades that carved countless wounds into a target, a kind of wind-scythe spell.

The vortex of blood was the result of the vacuum blades sucking up the blood.

It was a powerful, medium-scale offensive spell, which was rare for a cleric. However, since the *Madi* spell existed at the same level, almost no one used it.

In fact, Belial had never used it, so this was the first time Skallda had ever seen *Rolt*.

The six Mages collapsed one after another, splattering blood.

Skallda was astounded by the spell that had instantly shredded an entire group. He was shocked by its power and the fact that Alheim had used a Level 6 spell.

Because of this, he was a moment too late to notice the shadow scuttling along the back wall.

The shadow was heading toward Sara. Before he could yell out a warning, his body had moved. He slid his own body into the trajectory of the ki extending toward Sara's neck.

His Kasinart blade, swung as if to smash against the wall, sank deep into the torso of the shadow—a Master Ninja.

However, the dagger in the ninja's hand also gouged the side of Skallda's neck. If he hadn't gotten in the way, Sara's neck would have been surely severed.

He could feel a large amount of blood gushing out. His consciousness rapidly faded, and he felt all the strength leave his body.

Just before his vision went completely dark, he thought he heard Sara's voice.

When Skallda regained consciousness, he saw Sara's red-eyed face.

He was lying with his head on Sara's lap, as she sat kneeling on the floor.

"Sara... Are you okay?"

He squeezed out the words with all his might. But his voice was so faint he couldn't believe it was his own.

Sara's expression brightened.

"Skallda! You've stabilized!"

"See? I told you so. *Dialma* is more than enough to save you."

Alheim was standing at Skallda's feet.

"One more time and you'll be able to stand."

Sara shot a glare at Alheim as he began to chant a spell, but then immediately turned back to Skallda.

"Why were you so reckless... They say there's a very low chance of revival for a body right after a Class Change. If your heart had completely stopped like that..."

Big tears overflowed, and Sara turned her face away. These were tears the brave girl, who at the age of seventeen could wield numerous high-level spells, had never once shed during her two years of grueling training.

"Close combat is my job. And I'm not going to let a party member—and especially you—die."

Having regained a lot of strength thanks to Alheim's Dialma, Skallda finally spoke in a normal voice. "But to be so surprised by an ally's spell that I'd let an enemy get away... I'm like a rookie who just entered the labyrinth."

"That's exactly it!"

Sara looked up, her face still wet with tears. "The *Rolt* spell, right? He used that spell, but he grudged a *Madi* spell for you when you were about to bleed to death."

"Are we talking about this again?"

Alheim raised his voice in annoyance. It seemed a similar exchange had taken place while Skallda was unconscious.

"I saw that *Dialma* was sufficient. And here Skallda is, alive. I don't think I'm to be blamed; if anything, I deserve your thanks."

"I'm not a novice with spells. Skallda's heart was on the verge of stopping. *Madi* would have guaranteed his survival, but with *Dialma*, which has variable effects, there was less than a fifty-percent chance of him surviving at that moment."

"Who knows?"

Alheim shrugged.

"If he had died, it would have been bad luck. The *Madi* spell is something you save until the very last moment."

"Even if you used *Rolt*?"

"Thanks to that, the Mages were dealt with, weren't they? The probability of a *Montino* effect reaching all of them is less than fifty percent."

"That's not the point."

"Sara, stop it."

With that, Skallda sat up. He wasn't fully recovered, but he had enough stamina to move around normally. The large amount of blood he had lost was also being restored by the spell's blood-increasing effect.

"I'm alive. That's all that matters."

He stopped Sara, who still looked like she wanted to say something, and looked at Alheim, who stood with his arms crossed.

"Thanks for taking care of me, Alheim."

"Of course. We're party members, after all."

Saying only that, Alheim turned his back and walked toward the bloody sea where the Mages had fallen.

As Skallda stood up and followed him, Sara's words lingered in his mind.

"*Madi* would have guaranteed his survival, but with *Dialma*, there was less than a fifty-percent chance—"

Could it be that this man genuinely wanted me to die?

Uncertain how much he could trust the cunning Alheim, Skallda stood beside the man who was examining a blood-stained corpse. At Alheim's feet, one of the meager Mages lay sprawled.

"This one is still breathing. Just barely, though."

Scene 23. 7th Area

"*Roar!*"

The demon beast bellowed. A tremendous roar shook the air, making it vibrate.

It was a grotesque creature. Its head and torso were that of a giant lion, while its back half was the body of a black goat. Sharp claws extended from its front paws, and its hind legs were encased in hard hooves. A pair of thick, bat-like wings sprouted from the lion's back, flapping and rustling whenever the demon beast moved. It was a bizarre monster, a chimera made from the composite bodies of multiple creatures. But it had an even more unusual feature. It possessed three heads: one of a lion, one of a goat sprouting from the center of its back, and one of a snake at the end of its long, slimy tail.

It was a chimera, a synthetic beast created by magic. No one knew when it was created, but it had apparently become its own species now, inhabiting some high-mountain region and being sent in large numbers to the lower levels of the labyrinth.

The lion's head roared again. The goat's hooves scraped the stone floor, and the great serpent's mouth at the tip of the writhing tail exhaled a fiery breath. Arching its massive body, the chimera prepared to leap.

"Quiet!"

A flash of white steel. In the next instant, the lion's head was severed, and the black goat's head flew off. The demon beast collapsed forward and died.

"Don't make noise at a time like this."

It was Jaba.

With that, the battle was over.

It was in the antechamber of the fifth area, the lowest level. Next to the chimera's corpse lay four dead mages, clawing at their throats in a final, agonizing struggle. Their lips and nails were a dark blue-black, a clear sign of extreme oxygen deprivation. They had been struck by a level 6 mage spell: Suffocation (Lakanito), which erases

all oxygen from a medium-sized area. Since the spell removes not only the oxygen in the air but also the oxygen already absorbed into the bloodstream, it's a terrifying curse that instantly asphyxiates any living creature within its effective radius. This spell had wiped out the mage squadron.

It was Vulcan's doing.

With the guards all dead, only Jaba, Vulcan, and Sara were left in the antechamber.

"Amazing..."

Rasha, standing as if sheltered by Jaba's back, murmured. "Was that really you, Jaba?"

She was talking about the swordsmanship that had slain the chimera with a single blow.

"It wasn't amazing at all. Damn that old geezer Borteck! He said becoming a ninja with that dagger wouldn't do any harm, but my fingertips are getting numb. No matter how much stronger I've gotten, if I still trigger traps—"

Jaba's voice trailed off, filled with the regret and anger of having activated the Teleportation trap.

Rasha's expression suddenly brightened. "Well, then, why don't you let me join your party? Jaba, you're not a thief anymore. It's not weird to have a ninja and a thief in one party, right?"

"This isn't the time for that, you idiot!" Jaba glared at Rasha.

Just then, Vulcan's voice rang out. "Let's go."

Looking over, Jaba saw that Vulcan had already started walking toward the teleportation zone leading to the next area, the sixth.

"Wait, Vulcan. We agreed to meet back at the starting point of this level if we got separated. Not that way—"

As he spoke, Jaba felt a sense of unease. He knew it was important, but he couldn't pinpoint what it was about.

"Do you really think a warrior with a petrified arm and a newly-changed samurai could break through the guards so easily? We must go and find them, or it might be too late," Vulcan said without looking back. "If you're worried, you don't have to come. I'll be fine

on my own."

"Rasha, you should go back," Jaba said abruptly, his eyes fixed on Vulcan's back.

"Why? I'm coming with you."

"It's too dangerous. You'll just be dead weight."

Jaba saw Vulcan's figure vanish as he stepped into the teleportation zone. His body must have already been in the next underground passage.

"You were just lucky to be alive today. This labyrinth isn't for you —" Jaba looked at Rasha. "Go back to the village."

"Why?"

Large tears welled up in Rasha's eyes. "Why won't you take me with you? You—Jaba—left the village all on your own. We used to be together all the time, but you just decided on your own... and came to this labyrinth where you could die any minute. Am I just supposed to wait for you to come back to that village? What if you die without me knowing? No, I absolutely can't—"

"Rasha—" Jaba had never seriously considered what Rasha had gone through to survive in the labyrinth. He had just thought she was being rebellious and stubborn. That's why her words hurt so much.

"Alright. You can stay in the city. When I defeat Werdna and join the Royal Guard, we'll go back together to get my dad and mom."

"Really?"

"Why would I lie? Just don't go back into the dungeon. Got it?"

"Okay."

"Then go back to the castle. I'm going to look for Vulcan and Skallda and the others. I'm the one who triggered the trap, so I have to go, or I'll never forgive myself."

"Okay—"

"I'll be back."

Jaba ran off, his figure disappearing as if melting into the darkness.

"Jaba—"

Rasha looked toward the teleportation zone she had memorized from her few trips, then turned her gaze back to where Jaba had vanished.

And then, she began to walk.

The seventh and final area of the lowest level—

It was the last bastion of the evil archmage Werdna, who was holed up there, guarded by a squadron of vampires. Like the other six areas, it was an underground cavern composed of winding passages and a single antechamber.

But there was no way to go back. The teleportation zone that was always present in the other areas was not here.

It was a completely isolated area with no exit.

Three figures were moving through the dark passage. It was Skallda's party. With Skallda at the front, Alheim and Sara formed a triangular formation, advancing toward the final destination where Werdna's antechamber should be.

All three of them had tense expressions. Even the smirk on Alheim's face had disappeared at some point.

They had originally planned to return to the starting point of the lowest level from the sixth antechamber and wait for Gadi and Jaba to regroup. But Skallda's party had received information that two of them were captured and confined in Werdna's antechamber by the vampires. Alheim, who was suspicious of how quickly the guards had responded, had questioned one of the mages who was on the verge of death and found out that this was the very information that had been relayed.

The severely wounded mage, who apparently held no particular loyalty to Werdna, had easily confessed this under torture with Alheim's spells before finally giving in to death.

According to him, they hadn't been killed. But it wouldn't be for long.

There was no time to return to the castle and call for reinforcements. Besides, there were no other adventurers who could descend to the lowest level. If they didn't want to abandon their

comrades to their deaths, they had to act immediately. The only option left, short of defeating Werdna, was to infiltrate Werdna's antechamber and use the Ring of Movement that the two captives would be wearing to teleport to the upper levels.

Skallda had initially planned to go alone. But Sara strongly opposed it, arguing that Skallda would be helpless alone if they encountered multiple enemies on the way since he couldn't use spells. Skallda didn't want to bring Sara on such a dangerous rescue mission, but Sara's opinion was undeniably sound. If he went alone and was defeated, not only his life but also the lives of the two captives would be lost. Skallda reluctantly accepted the plan.

What was surprising was that even Alheim requested to come along. Although they had formed a party for convenience, Alheim, who followed the laws of evil, had no obligation to help Skaldda's party. He could have just returned to the starting point and used the teleportation zone to return to the surface. "It's not a bad idea to see Werdna's room once. And if we can defeat him, maybe I'll get some reward? It might be more fruitful than searching for new members —"

Skallda thought back to their conversation, sensing Alheim's presence behind him.

What is this guy's goal?

It was obvious that his reason about defeating Werdna was a lie. His opponent was a great archmage who was said to have mastered all spells and even dabbled in ancient forbidden magic. A party of three wouldn't be able to defeat him, not even by a stroke of luck.

The only thing he could gain is our complete annihilation—so he might be a traitor. But if that were the case, he could have easily finished us off when Sara and I were passed out. You could also argue that he kept us alive to break through the guards in the sixth antechamber... No, it would be a worse move to finish us off in this area.

No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't figure out why Alheim had joined them.

Skallda, who had been lost in thought, came back to reality after they had traveled a considerable distance down the passage. At some point, the passage had become a long, straight line. The intense presence that had snapped him back to reality was radiating

from the darkness ahead. It was a monstrous bloodlust, like a beast baring its fangs. It was a malevolent miasma, so heavy that it felt like a physical pressure. Skallda's entire body was covered in goosebumps. A chill of dread ran down the back of his neck. Alheim and Sara, who were not as sensitive to presence, also seemed to feel the same bloodlust.

Grrrrrrrrrr...

A low growl echoed in the passage.

In the darkness, a golden suit of armor appeared. Two horns, like a water buffalo's, glinted dully. It was a giant man with eyes shining brightly from inside his helmet. He held a broad, longsword in one hand, and his entire body was covered in magnificent golden armor. The man was letting out a beast-like growl.

Hah. The man exhaled, his breath looking like smoke.

"Have you come to rescue... your comrades?"

His voice sounded like he was forcing a sound through vocal cords not meant for human speech. A rumbling sound continued in the back of his throat.

It was the Vampire Lord, the highest-ranking magical swordsman who served Werdna. Skallda was meeting him for the first time, but Alheim's evil party had fought him once before.

"Be careful. He's a formidable opponent that Ha-Kim and Gogleg defeated together," Alheim whispered from behind. "He's an immortal fiend who can be resurrected multiple times by Werdna's magic."

"You shall not pass."

The moment he said that, the Vampire Lord let out a growl and charged forward.

He moved with a speed that belied his massive size. A heavy blow struck Skallda's raised shield, and a dull metallic sound echoed. The speed was so great that Skallda probably wouldn't have been able to dodge it if he hadn't read the attack using his "ki."

The Vampire Lord's sword struck a second time, a third. With his flawless swordsmanship, Skallda was completely on the defensive.

Sara and Alheim's spells were not even halfway through their incantations.

As the fourth blow was raised, Skallda felt a presence rapidly approaching from behind. It was closing in at an unbelievable speed. His concentration was broken, and his arm, holding the shield, which was numb from several impacts, dropped. The sword struck.

Damn it!

A gust of wind rushed past Skallda.

The Vampire Lord's body swayed. And then, it collapsed onto the floor.

A moment later, his severed head fell.

"Hey there."

The figure on the other side of the Vampire Lord's corpse said, "Looks like you're still alive."

It was Jaba. He had beheaded the Vampire Lord in a flash as he ran past from behind.

Turning around, Skallda saw Vulcan standing there.

"How did you know to come to this area?" Skallda asked.

"The trail of blood from the mages led to this teleportation zone. And when I got here, you were in the middle of a fight with that guy. You were so focused on him that you were wide open. It was an easy job." Jaba said, gesturing with his chin at the rolling head of the Vampire Lord.

The five of them quickly updated each other on the situation.

"If that mage didn't lie, then Belial and Gadi are being held in Werdna's antechamber." Alheim's lips twisted into a smile. "With this, maybe we don't have to run away after all. We might even be able to defeat Werdna. We've got a ninja and a mage who can even use *Tiltowait*."

"It's more like we're forced to fight. *Malor* can only carry six people at a time, and if we rescue Gadi and Belial, there will be seven of us. If we're unlucky, we might get teleported separately again, and this time we might end up inside a rock."

Skallda said.

"We can't just leave one person out. Especially since Vulcan is the only one who can use *Malor*. It makes a huge difference whether we have a mage who's mastered all the spells or not," Sara added.

Sara was right. Among the five of them, only Vulcan could get back on his own. Without him, the success rate of this rescue mission would change drastically.

"We will fight." Vulcan's muffled voice rang out. "It's not a losing battle. If we can just deal with the vampires that have escaped the spell, all that's left is Werdna. The *Dispel* spell is Alheim's specialty, isn't it?"

The scene from the antechamber on the ninth floor came to Skallda's mind. Indeed, Alheim's *Dispel* had been magnificent.

Their minds were made up.

"Alright," Skallda looked around at everyone. "We'll fight. But no one dies—"

The party began to advance toward Werdna's antechamber.

But Jaba's expression at the head of the group was slightly clouded. The sense of unease that had been lingering in the back of his mind had grown even larger.

I don't know what's wrong, but something's strange. I have a feeling that something is definitely off. And my gut feeling is usually right about this kind of thing.

But this was only for a few seconds. With the impending battle against Werdna, which would surely come in a matter of minutes, Jaba had stopped caring about the feeling of unease.

Gadi's senses were completely paralyzed, except for his hearing. A vampire lord's claws, like a precise instrument, had injected a paralyzing poison into every single one of his nerves. He had also lost all sensation of his skin, so he couldn't even detect the slightest breeze. The only things still functioning were his brain, his ears, and his vocal cords. Every organ except those necessary for interrogation had been painstakingly and meticulously shut down.

He heard the voice of the vampire lord. Even the king of the undead couldn't hide the irritation in his tone.

"This is the first time I've ever dealt with such a persistent human. Though you are but an inferior being, I must admit a certain respect for you in that regard."

"I'm honored," Gadi replied, his voice completely unshaken.

"Normally, you would have been screaming and begging for mercy by now. A person with a weak mind would not be able to endure just losing their sight."

"Is that so?"

"I am curious to see how long your kind can last with only your hearing. But unfortunately, I can no longer play with you. More importantly, I want to know about that man in the black robe."

Shink.

He heard the sound of something sharp tearing through the air. It was a sound so small that Gadi wouldn't have been able to hear it normally, but now that his ears were his only sense, his hearing had become incredibly acute. He felt like he could even hear a needle drop a few meters away. It was the sound of the vampire lord's claws extending.

"This will be my last question. I've forgotten how many times I've repeated it. But if you give me a deceptive answer like before, I will pierce your heart with my claws."

"..." Gadi was silent. He held his breath as if he were deep in thought.

Yes. He hasn't noticed yet. Keep it up.

"Are you finally getting scared? Good."

The vampire lord's voice held a note of satisfaction. "Now, give me the answer. What is that man's name?"

A little while ago, Gadi's ears had picked up an unfamiliar sound. The noise, which was getting stronger, had not reached the ears of the vampire lord or the other vampires. Gadi knew what the sound was.

Just a little more.

Crick?

One of the vampires seemed to have noticed the sound. But it was still hesitant whether to inform the vampire lord who was interrogating Gadi.

"What is the man's name?" The tone of the voice became sharper.

Although he couldn't feel it, the tip of the claw had apparently already penetrated his body.

The strange sound was coming from just beyond the antechamber door.

Now!

The vampire lord's anger reached its peak. "Very well! Then you can go to your eternal slumber!"

Just before the claw plunged forward, Gadi shouted, "His name is Vulcan!"

At the same time, the sound of the door being kicked open echoed throughout the antechamber.

Without a moment's delay, five sets of footsteps rushed into the room.

Scene 24. Werdna

A full view of the dimly lit chamber burst into Skallda's sight.

It was an empty space about twenty meters in diameter. Other than the door Skallda and the others had kicked open, there didn't appear to be any other exits.

In the center of the chamber were six vampires. Caught by surprise, they had not yet fully prepared for battle.

Near the wall in the back-right, a man stood wrapped in a deep blue formal suit and cape—the Vampire Lord. An expression of surprise was etched on his refined face as he turned around.

At his feet, Gadi and Belial were slumped against the wall. Their faces were hollow with the vacant look of paralysis, but Gadi's mouth seemed to be curving into a slight smile.

And in the back-center—the only piece of furniture in this stark chamber was an ornate throne. On it sat an old man with a long white beard, draped in a pale purple robe.

Skallda took in all of this information in an instant.

That must be Werdna.

Skallda's eyes were fixed on the old man on the throne who was looking down—Werdna. The mission for Jaba and Skallda, who were in the lead, was to take down this notorious great archmage of evil. It was decided that a direct attack with a sword would be more effective, as a wizard of Werdna's caliber might have the ability to neutralize spells possessed by demons or the undead.

Vulcan, who was right behind them, chanted a spell at an incredible speed. A magical wind shot out radially, overtaking Skallda.

An explosion occurred between Werdna and the vampires. Flames scattered, and the entire area was engulfed in a hellish blaze.

It was Vulcan's *Tiltowait*, the third time that day.

"Oh, spirits of the earth," Alheim shouted. In his outstretched right palm, a red, lightning-like light pulsed.

"Spirits of the earth, slumbering deep within the ground. Cut off the dark power that obstructs the law of life, of being born of the earth

and returning to the earth, and turn those arrogant ones who defile the land into pure, untainted dust—"

The sea of fire began to wane. From within it, three vampires emerged. They had successfully neutralized the spell.

It was Alheim's job to deal with them.

In his palm, a sphere of confined lightning crackled. He drew his right arm back.

"*Jibale!*"

He swung his arm forward. The orb of light burst, and a red bolt of lightning was absorbed into the floor.

The moment the vampires tried to leap out of the flames, countless bolts of lightning erupted from the ground and pierced their bodies. The vampires were enveloped in a pale fire and melted away in an instant.

This was Alheim's unique form of dispelling, which incorporated the spirit-based sorcery of local religions into the traditional method of using divine power to break curses. With the standard method, the success rate of dispelling decreases for higher-level undead monsters since they are farther removed from the divine. However, Alheim's sorcery, which borrowed the power of the earth spirits, could almost certainly break the curse, as long as the opponent wasn't an exceptionally powerful undead. It purified the very earth that conducted dark magical power, completely Kasinart off the undead's source of vitality.

The flames vanished. At the same time, Jaba and Skallda charged forward.

The vampires had been completely reduced to dust.

The Vampire Lord had just begun to chant what seemed to be the *Madalto* spell. There was nothing to impede their path to the throne.

On the throne, as expected, stood Werdna, who had repelled the flames of *Tiltowait*. A magical pressure, incomparably more intense than that of the Raberlord, violently struck Skallda, who was dashing forward.

Jaba's speed slowed noticeably. The closer they got to Werdna, the

stronger the resistance of the magical energy became.

Two steps from where the throne's range began, Jaba and Skallda were side by side. It was closer to a fast walk than a run.

It was then that Werdna finally looked up.

Hm!?

His eyes glowed with an eerie light.

Looking at Werdna's face up close, Skallda couldn't tell what it looked like. His gaze was fixated on those eyes, and he couldn't see any other part of the face.

It wasn't just his vision. Without realizing it, his entire body had frozen.

It was a paralysis spell. The moment Skallda looked at Werdna's eyes, the spell was cast. The same was true for Jaba. The Vampire Lord's *Madalto* spell assailed their bodies, which couldn't move a single finger. A blizzard of ice and snow mercilessly drained their strength.

Still, they couldn't tear their eyes away from the hypnotic, evil eyes.

Is this the end?

A thought akin to resignation crossed Skallda's mind.

In a matter of seconds, Werdna's Tiltowait would detonate. If that happened, the party would surely be wiped out.

I never did figure out what I was supposed to protect. I would have liked to know that much, at least—

Skallda was about to give up his resistance to the evil eyes.

It was at that moment that an image of someone emerged in Skallda's mind.

Golden hair and green eyes. It had been stored away in the depths of his heart for a long time.

It was Sara.

Sara!

Suddenly, the eerie light before him began to weaken.

I won't let Sara die!

The power of the evil eyes disappeared, and the paralysis was broken. Looking up, Skallda saw the blurry figure of Werdna, as if wrapped in a haze, about to cast Tiltowait.

Pouring all his strength into it, he took two steps forward. He threw away his shield and gripped his sword, Cuisinart, with both hands.

"*Hah!*"

From an overhand stance, he swung down in a single motion. A halo of ki light pierced Werdna's body.

Ooooooooh...

Werdna shrieked, and his form wavered. The incantation he was about to complete was broken.

Jaba came back to his senses.

"Take that!"

Jaba's sword slashed Werdna.

The next moment, Werdna struck them with a pressure that sent Skallda and Jaba flying.

The Vampire Lord was about to blast them with a second *Madalto*.

Just before he finished raising his arms to chant, something abnormal began to happen in the center of the Vampire Lord's body.

It felt as if his insides were burning.

"This is—"

A moment later, the Vampire Lord's body vanished. His formal suit fell to the ground with a rustle.

A high, singing resonance of a chant echoed from Sara's throat. Sara had cast a spell on the Vampire Lord.

It was *Jilwan*, a 6th-level spell like *Lakanito*. It was created to combat the undead, who could not be killed by *Lakanito*. Unusually for a high-level spell, it only affects a single undead monster.

But its power was immense, completely destroying and annihilating the body of a single undead monster. The Vampire Lord—who stood

at the pinnacle of all undead, whose very existence made a priest's Dispel almost useless, Werdna's right-hand man, a nobleman of darkness as feared as Flack in legend—could not withstand a direct hit from Jilwan.

Now, only Werdna remained.

But Skallda and Jaba were too off-balance.

Werdna's form had only wavered for an instant. Before the two who had fallen to the floor could get back on their feet, the sign for *Tiltowait* was formed again.

A magical wind blew past them from the front. Although there was no time to make it, Skallda pushed off the floor and began to charge.

A black shadow, moving at an unbelievable speed, passed him by.

It was Vulcan. He was incredibly fast.

His movements were like those of Ha-Kim's puppet, manipulated by Flack, transcending the limits of a physical body.

Just as the power of Tiltowait was about to be unleashed, Vulcan's attack reached Werdna.

Magical energy exploded.

With his black robe torn to shreds, Vulcan was thrown back violently. He had taken the Tiltowait blast at point-blank range.

Vulcan's body flew past Skallda's head and was flung towards the entrance of the chamber.

In that opening, Skallda had once again closed the distance.

Werdna's form was wavering greatly. He was writhing in agony, as if scratching at his face with both hands.

Werdna, who had only flinched slightly from the attacks of Skallda and Jaba, was taking massive damage from a single blow by Vulcan, a wizard.

It was strange, but there was no time to think.

The magical energy had weakened. With no pressure pushing his body back, the distance to Werdna was closed in an instant.

When he took the final step, Skallda's ki had been condensed to its absolute limit.

He felt as if he could see a single glowing thread inside Werdna.

Aiming for that, Skallda swung his sword.

All of his bent ki surged from the thin blade. The phantom blade traced that thin light without a single error.

Gah!

A short cry was heard, and Werdna's movements stopped.

It became a death throe.

Werdna fell backward, as if to sit on the throne.

Skallda was about to add another blow, but seeing that he wasn't moving at all, he lowered his sword.

It was then that a change began to occur.

Werdna's outline began to blur.

What is this?

Before the fully tense Skallda, Werdna's body, along with his robe, was rapidly turning into mist.

When it had completely lost its physical form, the purple mist slowly began to contract. It gathered into a single point above the throne, gradually picking up speed.

On the crystal throne, which had no leather upholstery, lay a piece of cold-glowing metal. Skallda had never seen it before; it was a pale purple. It was as thin as paper and shaped like an oval, just the right size to fit in a palm.

The mist was being sucked into it.

Finally, at the speed of lightning striking the earth, all of the mist disappeared into the metal fragment.

It was a phenomenon that was difficult to comprehend.

Werdna's corpse had vanished in an instant, and in its place was a mysterious metal fragment.

Still on his guard, Skallda was drawn to the fragment and reached

for it.

The moment he took it in his hand, the pain of the frostbite caused by Madalto vanished. And from the center of his body, a vitality similar to a light warmth rapidly spread.

"This is—"

Skallda let out a voice of surprise.

But Jaba, who was right behind him, didn't hear him.

He had finally figured out what that strange feeling he had had since Vulcan started walking in the fifth area's chamber was.

I was mistaken because he could use all sorts of spells, but I'm sure this is his first time in this dungeon. He said he had just arrived at the fortress, too. So how was he able to go into the teleportation zone to the next underground passage without even getting lost? And when he slashed Werdna, he seemed to have a long, thin sword. That's not the kind of thing a wizard can handle.

"Hey Skallda, something's not right—"

Just as Jaba was about to say it, two screams rang out from behind him.

"*Gah!*"

"*Ahhh!*"

It was Alheim's groan and Sara's scream.

The two of them instinctively turned around.

The first thing their eyes saw was Alheim, lying on the ground, his crimson robe stained even redder, gasping for breath. A large gash had been cut from his chest to his stomach, through his chainmail, and a large amount of blood was flowing out.

Beyond him—with her back to the chamber door, stood Sara and Vulcan. Vulcan's arm was wrapped around Sara's neck from behind, restricting her movement.

In his other hand, he held a sword wet with Alheim's blood.

It was a longsword-like, slightly curved single-edged blade. It seemed too heavy for a wizard with less physical strength to wield.

"Sara!"

"Vulcan, you're—"

As they cried out and tried to run to her, Vulcan's muffled voice stopped them.

"Don't move any further."

He lifted the bloody sword with a flick of his wrist. "You wouldn't want to see this woman die, would you?"

The two froze in place after taking a few steps. "That's better."

A low laugh echoed from Vulcan's throat.

At that moment, Sara, who had been half-unconscious, thrashed violently. Her fingers snagged on the black cloth covering Vulcan's mouth and pulled it down.

Vulcan's face was revealed.

Sara shrieked and fainted.

Skallda was about to let out a short cry, too.

What was revealed from under the mask was the face of a dead man, so putrefied that the skin had melted away—.

Scene 25. Naclav

"You seem surprised," said the hideously gaunt face, its bone-like features grinning. The rotting flesh clinging to its sunken cheeks seemed on the verge of bursting.

"It’s because the person who was just a moment ago a part of your party is now in this state."

"So you were being controlled by an undead," Skallda muttered under his breath.

A gurgling sound emanated from Vulcan's throat, as if in amusement. "No, that is not so. I still have my own consciousness."

"The soul of a man cannot return to a corrupted corpse," Skallda said.

Kaka kaka...

The skull-like jaw moved up and down as if overcome with mirth. "Some of the ancient magic that was sealed away holds a power so great you cannot even imagine it. Something that could breathe life into me, who has been in the depths of the earth for several years."

Vulcan's eyes fell upon Alheim, who was gasping on the floor. "And yet now, I am little more than an undead. I was planning to end his life, but that boy managed to escape. Even so, in this state, he won't be able to use a dispel."

Taking advantage of his averted gaze, Jaba hunched his body slightly. He bent his knees, tensing his muscles, ready to charge at any moment.

By Jaba's calculations, the distance to Vulcan was just over ten meters. A distance he could cover in less than two seconds.

Vulcan's physical decay was quite advanced. His sensory organs were almost certainly non-functional. He intended to exploit this slow reaction time to rescue Sara.

However, just as he was about to jump, Vulcan turned to face him as if anticipating his move. The timing was off, and Jaba stumbled.

"Fool. Whatever a novice ninja like you plots, it all transmits through your ki. If you ever think of such a thing again, your life

will be forfeit."

"What in the hell are you—"

"A samurai!" Skallda shouted. "You were a samurai!"

"You finally realized it." A black, discolored tongue slithered mockingly between Vulcan's thin lips.

Skallda's eyes were fixed on the long sword Vulcan held. Its shape was almost identical to the Japanese sword he had acquired at the Job Change Dojo.

It can't be.

"What do you want? Don't tell me you're just going to make us stay here," Jaba said.

"That's exactly it." Vulcan's gaze fell on the metal fragment in Skallda's hand. "Give me that charm."

"What!" both of them shouted at once.

"This is the charm of legend—"

"Yes. Hand that over, and I will release the woman. After that, I have no use for you." Vulcan's eyes gleamed sharply.

"So this is what you're after," Skallda muttered, staring at the charm in his palm.

So someone who resurrected him with ancient magic wants this charm.

It was certainly an item of incredible power. Thanks to its healing properties, Skallda had almost fully recovered his strength in a short amount of time. It was as if his brush with death had never happened.

Rumor also had it that the charm could generate a powerful magical barrier that could deflect any attack. It was no wonder that someone would want to get their hands on it, not just Trebor.

However, Skallda did not feel a strong attachment to the charm. While it would undoubtedly be useful in any battle, its power was not his own. The power he truly desired was the strength of his own body.

He would have gladly handed over the charm to save Sara's life.

But...

There was no guarantee that Sara would be released if he gave in to Vulcan's demand.

This was a person who had just suddenly attacked Alheim. It wouldn't be surprising if, the moment he received the charm, he blasted them with a Teltwight or Lakanito spell. In fact, that was the more likely outcome.

"Come on, throw it over here quickly," Vulcan urged Skallda. "You, as a samurai, should know that even if you try to throw it askew, your ki will give it away. If you do, I won't hold back."

The sword was now pressed against the neck of the unconscious Sara.

If I can just cut off his arm holding the sword.

That alone would buy Jaba enough time to close the distance. But to do that, he would need an iaijutsu twice as fast as the Samurai Master's and something to distract Vulcan's ki for just a moment.

Gadi had been using only his ears to keep track of everything that was happening.

Since the samurai Vulcan could read ki, both Skallda and Jaba were unable to move.

Based on what he had seen of Skallda today, it seemed that ki was an aura compressed when a person takes action, and the movement of that ki was, in a sense, the precursor to the body's movement.

Even with Skallda's natural talent, a level 1 samurai could read movements so brilliantly. A high-level samurai like Vulcan would surely detect even the slightest disturbance in his ki.

And yet, Vulcan had specifically taken Sara hostage and demanded the charm. He was in a position to easily destroy Skallda and the others with a powerful spell from behind.

Gadi suddenly realized the reason.

Vulcan is so badly injured he can't cast spells.

Though he didn't show it because he was a zombie with no sense of pain, he must have suffered significant wounds in the battle against Werdna. If he were to give him the charm, which had healing

powers—

"What's wrong? Hurry up," Vulcan's voice echoed.

Please, just for this one moment.

Gadi rose and lunged at Vulcan. His paralyzed body, of course, did not move.

But his ki alone struck Vulcan with tremendous force.

"Wha—!?"

Vulcan flinched. A sharp surge of ki had come from a direction he had never expected. Vulcan's attention shifted away from Skallda.

Now.

In that instant, all distractions vanished from Skallda's mind.

Vulcan, the charm in his hand, and the very act of Kasinart, all disappeared from his thoughts. All that remained was a clear, infinite expanse.

At that moment, Skallda's mind was in a state of nothingness.

An instant became infinite, and the distance of space became null.

He released an infinite amount of ki toward a single, condensed point in space.

When he came to, he was bringing his sword down.

Vulcan's sword, along with the arm that held it, slowly fell to the floor.

It was the sound of the sword hitting the stone floor that finally brought Skallda's senses back to normal.

Jaba charged forward.

Vulcan shoved Sara aside and leaped to the side. Jaba barely managed to catch Sara, unable to land a blow.

Vulcan's face twisted with hatred. His taut skin tore, and rotting pus oozed out.

"A fledgling like you, using iaijutsu—" A rasping sound came from deep within his throat.

"I won't die alone!"

Vulcan raised his remaining arm to his face. He was preparing to cast the spell Lakanito, intending to take as many of them with him as possible.

But faster than he could, a spell chant echoed from somewhere.

It was a high, enchanting melody. It reached even Vulcan's decaying eardrums.

"Who is it? I cannot feel any ki—"

In the next moment, Vulcan's body was disintegrated into atomic dust.

Jilwan? Skallda looked in the direction the spell had come from. It was the area where Gadi and the others were.

A human head sprouted from the floor. The point where the head met the floor was bubbling rapidly.

Its eyes glowed a vibrant red.

"A vampire!?"

"Wait. I no longer have the will to fight."

In the meantime, the bubbles erupted more violently. They gradually formed into the shape of a person's shoulders and chest.

The Vampire Lord was regenerating.

"By Lord Werdna's command, I am forbidden from fighting the one who holds the charm again. A battle with me, a true immortal, would be endless."

"What do you mean?" Skallda asked, still holding his sword ready.

"I will tell you once I have finished regenerating. The meaning of this labyrinth, and who that zombie—Naclav—belongs to. I pushed myself a little too far with that last *Jilwan*."

The Vampire Lord closed his eyes.

In the sudden silence, the curved blade on the floor gleamed white.

Scene 26. Amulet

Skallda was holding Alheim.

A single strike from Vulcan had slit his abdomen, grazing his internal organs. Alheim was on the verge of losing consciousness from the immense amount of blood loss.

Just in case, Jaba was keeping watch over the regenerating Vampire Lord. Although his spells had saved them from their predicament, their opponent was a monster of death. There was no telling if he wouldn't attack them again once he had fully recovered.

Gadi and Belial, still paralyzed, were being looked after by Sara who had woken up. For now, it seemed that their lives were not in any danger.

Held by Skallda, Alheim opened his eyes slightly.

"...In a man's arms..."

His voice was on the verge of fading. Perhaps due to the faintness of his voice, the corner of his lips twisted into a self-mocking grimace.

"Don't speak unnecessarily. The bleeding is severe."

To make Alheim even slightly more comfortable, Skallda lowered the arm supporting his head.

"Quickly use a *Madi* spell. The wound is quite deep. A *Dialma* might not be enough to save you."

Alheim smiled weakly.

"...My right arm, on my chest..."

Alheim's limp arm was placed on his chest. A faint chant began to sound, in broken fragments.

Skallda felt relieved. It seemed he had just enough strength left to cast a spell. With a *Madi* spell, Alheim would recover instantly.

But he quickly realized that it wasn't a *Madi* spell.

It was *Dialma*. Magical light began to spread from his right palm, but because Alheim himself was injured, it flickered violently.

If the healing effect of this spell didn't work, Alheim would have no

strength left for another spell. With no one else to cast a healing spell, all that awaited him was death.

With Alheim's youth, he could easily be revived at the Temple of Cant even if his heart stopped. However, the wide-ranging sword wound would cause his body to rot quickly, and there was a high possibility that his soul could not be called back once they returned to the surface. This was not a situation to be stingy with a *Madi* spell.

"Alheim! Why—"

Skallda's voice trailed off. The color was rapidly draining from Alheim's face.

"...Did it fail..."

His purple lips moved slightly. "It worked well when it was you..."

Alheim was referring to the *Dialma* he had cast when Skallda was on the verge of blood loss.

"Don't give up! If you just cast a *Madi* spell, you'll be saved!"

In response to Skallda's desperate plea, Alheim, who was about to close his eyes, smiled. It was the first time this man had shown such an innocent, childlike smile.

"There was a time when I took it for granted to encourage others like that... I wonder when... I stopped feeling that way—"

"Cast the spell."

"I can't."

Alheim let out a deep breath. "The truth is... I haven't mastered *Madi* yet."

"What—"

"It's a pathetic thing for a priest who aims for master level, so I was going to keep it a secret..."

In Skallda's arms, Alheim's body began to tremble.

"Alheim!"

"...In the end, I couldn't abandon my senior apprentice... That's why being Good is..."

His final words were too faint to be heard. With another smile, Alheim closed his eyelids.

The trembling was no longer there.

"Alheim..."

"What's wrong, Skallda—"

Noticing the change, Sara approached. "What about Alheim?" With a pained expression, Skallda shook his head.

"What?"

"Alheim... hadn't mastered the *Madi* spell."

Skallda's voice was trembling.

"No way—"

Seeing Alheim's peaceful expression, Sara was speechless.

"That's why he could use the *Lolt* without a moment's hesitation."

"...So, the *Dialma* was..."

"It was his best healing spell—"

Even though Alheim had hidden it, they were filled with intense regret for having blamed and doubted the way he used the spell.

"To clear up a misunderstanding at the very end, he's just too dramatic—"

Sara muttered, her words choked up.

Because her eyes were watering, it seemed as if Alheim's eyelashes were quivering. His face also seemed to have a bit of color returning to it.

It was as if he was coming back to life.

Huh?

Sara rubbed her eyes. Her vision became clear.

Life had returned to Alheim's face. His chest, where the bleeding had stopped, was slowly rising and falling.

"Skallda, a moment."

"What is it?"

Skallda, who was holding Alheim in a silent prayer, answered.

"Alheim... isn't he alive?"

"What did you say?"

Skallda opened his eyes in a panic.

Alheim was breathing. A regular breathing sound leaked from between his lips.

The *Dialma* spell had worked.

After taking a few deep breaths, Alheim woke up.

"...Oh?"

Skallda and Sara looked at each other.

"Looks like he's okay."

"Yeah."

They both burst out laughing at the same time.

Alheim was confused at first, but his expression soon became a wry smile.

"What a mess we went through."

Gadi muttered, rotating his left shoulder which had finally returned to normal.

Belial, whose paralysis had been neutralized by Alheim's healing spell, had been given a *Madi* spell. All of his senses, paralyzed by the Vampire Lord, as well as his petrified left arm, had recovered in an instant.

Skallda and the others stood in the center of Werdna's chamber. The party was now six people, with Alheim replacing Vulcan.

In front of them, the Vampire Lord, who had completely regenerated and was dressed in a formal suit and cape, stood motionless.

This undead demon had resurrected in just a few minutes after being blown away by Sara's *Jilwan* spell. While other undead are "Living Dead," this king of the undead was truly "immortal."

In Skallda's hand was the amulet. It was a powerful item that

Werdna had supposedly stolen from Trebor. If they returned to the surface with it, Trebor would pay a large reward, and they would be promoted to the Royal Guard.

It was safe to say their quest was complete. Once they returned to the castle, Skallda and his companions would be welcomed as heroes.

However, there were too many things that were difficult to understand.

First, there was Werdna. The corpse of the great sorcerer, who was supposed to have been finished off by Skallda, turned into mist and vanished into the amulet. This was not something a physical being could do.

Next, there was the zombie of Vulcan, who had been revived by someone's hand. This man, who had entered the party just as Silver was Lost and tried to seize the amulet, clearly knew the maze intimately.

And now, upon reflection, the very existence of the maze was a mystery. The monsters grew stronger layer by layer from the upper to the deeper levels, as if to encourage adventurers' growth. Even stranger was the transfer point to the surface located at the lowest level. It was as if the maze's master, Werdna himself, desired the adventurers' survival .

All of these mysteries were about to be revealed by the Vampire Lord, Werdna's right-hand man. Despite this, Skallda and the others were not letting their guard down. After all, their opponent was the progenitor of all undead monsters, a demon who had existed for thousands of years since his appearance in this world.

If he made the slightest strange movement, everyone was ready to attack or dispel instantly.

"Hmm. For young people, you have quite a presence. I can understand why you were able to dispatch a Vampire Lord so easily."

The Vampire Lord looked around at the party members and said, "And Gadi, you've certainly gathered an interesting group of companions."

"Like a samurai who just had a class change and comes all the way

here. We also have a drunk female sorcerer."

Gadi replied, back to his usual self.

"Who are you calling—"

"Leaving that aside,"

Skallda interrupted Sara. "I have a mountain of questions to ask."

"I know. But before that."

The Vampire Lord looked at the door behind Skallda and the others.

Skallda also felt a presence.

The door opened slightly, and something peeked into the silent chamber.

It had red hair.

"Rasha!"

Jaba shouted.

"Jaba! You're okay?"

Rasha entered the chamber. She seemed relieved to see Jaba, but upon noticing the Vampire Lord, she hesitated.

"Is she a companion?"

The Vampire Lord looked at Skallda.

"Something like that. Continue."

"You said you were going back to the castle!"

Jaba ran toward her. "Do you even know where you are? This is Werdna's chamber!"

"Who was it who went to Werdna's place without telling anyone? I was going to go back from the sixth chamber, but the footprints led this way. So I came here."

"Those were Skallda's footprints—well, he is here. But still, what good is it for you to come here?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Rasha pouted. Her eyes fell on the red-eyed man standing a head taller than Skallda and the others.

"Who is he? And what about Werdna—"

"We killed Werdna."

"What? So, you'll be promoted to Sir Trebor's Royal Guard?"

Rasha's face lit up.

"That's what's confusing about all this. Anyway, you'd better listen, too."

The two of them returned.

"Was the one we defeated truly Werdna?"

Skallda began his questions. "He seemed to turn into a mist and disappear into the amulet."

"It was indeed Lord Werdna. And that amulet is also the real one."

The Vampire Lord said in a monotone voice.

"What do you mean 'indeed'?"

"That was a manifestation of Lord Werdna's will."

"Not his physical body?"

"Precisely."

"Why?"

For a moment, an expression of something between hatred and sadness appeared on the Vampire Lord's beautiful face.

"Lord Werdna's physical body perished long ago. During the time that slayer party invaded."

"He's dead!?"

Although he had somewhat expected it since he saw the vanishing body, Skallda was deeply shocked. The other six were the same.

"It's a different kind of death than what you think. Lord Werdna, having prepared for his death, willingly chose to become a spirit. Without any feeling, he became a mere thought to protect the amulet—"

The Vampire Lord cut his words short.

It was Belial who spoke first. "Could it be the transcendence into a

living spirit that cannot even find peace?"

"You know of it?"

"What is that?"

Skallda asked.

"It's an advanced sorcery that binds one's soul to some kind of medium. If it succeeds, even if the physical body is lost, the soul alone will continue to live in this world forever as long as the medium exists. But—"

"No one would willingly do such a thing."

Alheim continued after Belial.

"Transferring one's soul to another is nothing but pure agony. People say that when they die, their soul is liberated from the present world and finds rest. But if you perform that sorcery, the soul remains in the present world forever and will never feel at peace."

"Doesn't that mean you can live forever?"

"Think about it. If you lose your physical body, you won't need to eat, sleep, or even indulge in carnal desires. Not needing something means that those desires will never be satisfied. You just exist—"

Alheim shrugged. "Only time is eternal. Can you endure that?"

"That is correct."

The Vampire Lord said. "But Lord Werdna chose that path. In the moment before his death, he used his last bit of strength to go to Trebor's bedroom and take the amulet."

Skallda looked at the piece of metal in his palm.

"As a small revenge against Trebor, then. It's said to have been a family treasure more precious than his life."

"That is not it."

His tone was forceful.

"It's not?"

"It is not. That amulet was made fifty years ago by Lord Werdna himself using an ancient magic that even I don't know. He prayed

that its powerful force would pacify the age of constant war. And a certain king, given the power of the amulet, brought about a great era of peace."

"How did it fall into Trebor's hands?"

"That king was Trebor's father. After the king's death, Trebor plundered the treasury and learned of the amulet's power. As you know, the now-invincible Trebor army began to rapidly expand its territory with a furious momentum."

The Vampire Lord stared into the void.

"The amulet caused the wars. Against Lord Werdna's will. That's when he devised a plan. A power that resides in the human body that could not be exploited by a mad king—when many people acquire this power and disperse across the land, a long period of peace would return. To that end, Lord Werdna thought a training ground where one constantly flirts with death was necessary."

Everyone listened without making a sound.

"This maze was built to create people like you—"

The Vampire Lord's voice echoed.

"The miscalculation was that among the slayer party sent by Trebor, there was one samurai. The man, who carried a cursed blade, managed to reach this chamber with his overwhelming swordsmanship even after losing all his subordinates. He was transferred deep underground by Lord Werdna's spell, but just before that, the man's sword had destroyed something inside Lord Werdna. It was a technique called Iai."

"—The man called Naclav?"

"Yes."

The Vampire Lord looked at Skallda. "There is no doubt that he was the man called Vulcan."

"..."

Skallda slowly turned around.

His gaze was fixed on the blade shining coldly on the floor.

"That's... the Murasama..."

"If you should happen to find it, it will bring about your ruin. It will have become a true cursed blade."

The old elf's warning came back to him.

But it's the only thing that can surely cut down those demons...

"—Skallda."

Called by Sara, Skallda came back to his senses. He had unconsciously been unable to take his eyes off the blade.

Was I enchanted by the cursed blade?

"Then who was controlling Vulcan—no, Naclav's zombie?" Jaba said. "He was saying something about ancient magic."

"I have a guess. Most likely—"

Just as the Vampire Lord was about to speak, a pale blue fireball appeared in the space behind him.

"*Hmm!?*"

As he turned, the fireball multiplied to three. They began to swell.

"Blast! There's still a while before Lord Werdna's revival—"

A growl that seemed to drown out his own shout burst from the fireballs.

It was a Greater Demon.

Scene 27. Muramasa

Inside the three fireballs, a devil with twisted horns was materializing.

Thump.

Skallda's heart pounded violently. The memory of his last battle as a warrior—that final fight—came rushing back. A burning desire for revenge flared within him.

"You creatures of the demon world!" the Vampire Lord cried. "You're not getting the amulet!"

With a low murmur, a red gaseous substance spewed from his mouth. It enveloped the expanding fireballs. A huge shadow writhed in agony within the blue flames.

Groan, groan, groan...

The red gas seemed to be neutralizing the flames. The three demons, unable to bear it, vanished, retreating to the demon world. The fireballs and gas mixed together and dissolved into the space.

"Hey, what was that about?" Jaba asked, his surprise evident. "Weren't those monsters your minions?"

"They were, once," the Vampire Lord's voice sounded exhausted. "Back when Lord Werdna opened the dimensional path between this labyrinth and the demon world and summoned them. But after Lord Werdna's death, those demons rebelled. They—the greater demons—have been waiting for an opportunity to burst into our world. Their true aim is to get their hands on the amulet and bring their demonic king to this world."

"What?" Belial's face went pale. "The king of demons… could it be—"

"Myhrfic, the demon god who trampled the earth with his magic in ancient times. The very demon lord who completely destroyed the ancient magical civilization is now awakening from a thousand-year slumber."

"A demon god? You mean, like in the old legends?"

"That's right," Belial answered Rasha. "In some places he's also

called Baz or Pazuzu. Legends say he had the power to control even the weather, but—"

"It's true. The ancient kingdom, which had magic far more powerful than what exists today, was destroyed by a storm that lasted for several hundred days."

"But it's said that casters from all over the world gathered their power and, in exchange for many of their lives, the demon god was also destroyed," said Alheim.

"That was only the end of Myhrfic's physical form in this dimension. His true form is in the demon world, and we cannot lay a hand on him from here—"

His voice trailed off, and his body swayed.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing serious." The Vampire Lord looked at the group with a pained expression. "The spell to seal their gate is quite tiring, and it takes its toll on a body that has only just been regenerated. They will soon return, but I can no longer use that same spell."

"Why do the demons want the amulet?" Skallda asked.

"For Myhrfic's complete resurrection. The bodies of the demon race are not suited for our world, but if the amulet's magical barrier is in effect, he will be able to appear in this dimension."

"So when that happens, the surface will be swept clean again, and those monsters will reign supreme—"

Skallda tightened his grip on the amulet. "No way."

"You have nothing to worry about. Lord Werdna's consciousness should be resurrected in about an hour. Once he is, we won't have to fear those demons. Lord Werdna possesses ancient magic that can stand against the demon race."

"The greater demons will come before then," said Skallda.

"Among those who serve Lord Werdna, there is a demonic creature, Flack, who can control powerful flames that even demons cannot repel," the Vampire Lord said with a confident smile. "He's usually in a different space, but by chance, he's in this labyrinth today. If we can summon him, we can handle one or two assaults."

Gadi and Jaba exchanged an awkward glance.

"Besides Flack, are there any other reliable guys?" Gadi asked. "Like a dragon, or a bunch of ninja?"

"The fire dragons were decimated the other day, so I haven't brought any more yet. You all remember that, don't you?"

Alheim nodded silently. Indeed, a few days ago, he and Ha-kim had defeated about five fire dragons.

"Furthermore, the demons can dominate the minds of those with low intelligence. The possessed are manipulated while they're still alive, and then their brains are destroyed, killing them. Unfortunately, most of our ninja minions don't have the mental fortitude to resist that. It would only increase the number of our enemies."

Skallda recalled the corpses of the ninjas in the first chamber who had no external wounds—the ones who had attacked Alheim's group with the greater demons.

"I see—"

Seeing Skallda's attitude, the Vampire Lord frowned. "What are you worried about? Even in the surface world, the name Flack is known, isn't it? He can—"

"I didn't say anything because you didn't ask when you interrogated us," Gadi said, tapping his left arm. "Flack's the one who turned my arm to stone."

"—What?"

"Whether it's good luck or bad, we took down Flack. His main body seems to have escaped, though."

"..."

Gadi scratched his head, looking at the Vampire Lord, who was probably utterly dumbfounded for the first time since his appearance in this world. "It looks like we'll have to help stop those monsters, too."

"Hah. I thought we finally got the amulet, but it came with some damn nasty side effects," Jaba grumbled. "Hey, can't we at least get Rasha and Sara to the surface?"

"That won't be possible," Sara said, eyes closed. "This entire chamber is encased in a powerful magical barrier. We can't use Mahlort to teleport. It seems they have no intention of letting this opportunity slip away."

Skallda's eyes fell upon the sword of Kasinart, which he had drawn in caution against the Vampire Lord. The hard, sharp blade gave off a dull sheen. The edge, thinner than the tip of a hair, had been struck against the tough hides of rock-hard monsters countless times before. Yet, there were no nicks in the blade. Among the many swords he had held, it was the best. As a warrior's weapon meant to cleave objects by force, it was probably the strongest in existence.

However, to channel his ki, the blade was too thick and heavy. It wasn't a weapon made for a samurai. Now that he could perform iai, Skallda's ki could cut through an enemy's insides without being hindered by any obstacles. Not even a greater demon's steel-like hide would stop his sword. He should have been able to fight on equal footing or better.

But for the battle that was about to begin, that would not be enough. He could not allow the demons to cast their spells. He had to kill them in a single strike, and as many as he could.

Skallda's gaze shifted to the Muramasa.

With that, I can do it.

The blade, which shone with an icy light, seemed to be pleading with him. This was a blade forged for the sole purpose of focusing one's ki into a single point. The blade, just under a meter long, had a gentle, uniform curve, and in its last few centimeters, the curve sharpened dramatically to form the point. Its length and angle seemed utterly perfect.

The desire to take it in his hands immediately was maddening.

A warning bell rang somewhere in his mind.

The Muramasa is looking for a new master, a swordsman who can be driven mad by the magic of a demonic blade.

As the old elf had said, there was a possibility that many grudges were attached to the Muramasa. If so, the moment he took it, he might be controlled by malicious thoughts, becoming a mad swordsman unable to distinguish between friend and foe.

This was a gamble. His mind was already made up.

"Jaba," Skallda said, sheathing the Kasinart and holding it out. "Use this."

"Huh? What about you?"

Skallda tossed the sword. Jaba fumbled to catch it.

"Skallda!" Sara, realizing the meaning, cried out. "You heard what they said. That sword is a demonic blade. Don't touch it—"

Skallda was already walking toward the Muramasa.

"Wait!"

"Sara, I have a favor to ask," Skallda said, his back still turned.

"Huh—yes?"

"Stand in front of me. And if it looks like I'm losing to the demonic blade, don't hesitate to hit me with a spell."

"I can't possibly—"

Skallda cut Sara off before she could say, I could never do that. Their eyes met.

"Please. I need to see if I can handle the Muramasa. I'm not saying this on a whim."

"..."

After a few seconds of silence, Sara nodded. "There's no point arguing with that look in your eyes, you stubborn man. All right. I'm ready."

"Thank you."

With the other members watching, the two approached the Muramasa. Lying near the sword was Vulcan's—the Naclav's—robe, now just a shapeless black cloth. His body had been decomposed by the spell Decompose, leaving only his clothes behind. A crimson lacquered scabbard protruded from the cloth. It was clearly the Muramasa's. Skallda picked it up.

If I can sheath the Muramasa, I win.

He gripped the curved scabbard in his left hand and took a deep breath. "Here I go."

He spoke to Sara, who was watching him with tension, lowered his hips, and extended his right arm toward the Muramasa's hilt.

He grabbed the Muramasa.

At that moment, the blade seemed to him to glow white-hot. The ki he channeled into the Muramasa had erupted from the blade. It was on a completely different level. Just by holding it, his ki was becoming the blade.

But Skallda had no time to be surprised by that. A tremendous psychic wave was assaulting his mind. It was the countless thoughts that had been sealed within the Muramasa for an unimaginable amount of time.

“It hurts.”

“I’m in pain.”

“I hate this.”

“Revenge”

The death cries from the depths of the underworld echoed directly in Skallda's head. It was the unending lament of those whose lives had been taken by the Muramasa.

Separate from those, there was an even more powerful thought that was trying to dominate Skallda.

“I want to cut.”

“I want to see blood.”

“I want to kill.”

“Cut them down and kill them!”

A surge of destructive and murderous impulses. It was undeniably the thought of madness. Skallda knew what this thought was. It was the thoughts of the Muramasa's previous owners, captivated by its power. They had become a demonic aura, seeking to add new companions to their ranks. Among them was the thought of the Naclav.

“Give yourself to the Muramasa, you youngling. A sword exists to kill. Cut. Cut them down and kill them. Find relief—”

Skallda’s body began to tremble. His body and mind were in a

fierce internal struggle. He tried to return the Muramasa to its scabbard, but his arm was as if it had turned to stone. His clenched teeth ground against each other. He was on the verge of being consumed by the mad thoughts.

“Cut them down!”

A glint of madness appeared in Skallda's eyes. In front of him was Sara.

“Cut them down!”

Sara showed no sign of casting a spell. His body began to move, trying to make the Muramasa drink blood. Sara didn't move. Her eyes were filled with complete trust in Skallda.

“Cut them down!”

"Shut up!" Skallda yelled. The sound of his own voice broke the spell. The Muramasa, which he had begun to raise, stopped. "The Muramasa doesn't kill people. It was you who loved blood and took many lives. Remember the pain and the resentment of those you killed!"

“Revenge!”

Inside the Muramasa, the cries of its victims rose sharply. And they attacked their true enemies—the mad thoughts of their owners.

“*Gyaah!*”

The demonic aura was being consumed by the overwhelming number of grudges. The thoughts of the dead, which had been directed at the Muramasa for so long, had now found their true enemy.

Skallda held the Muramasa high. The blade vibrated with a low hum. "Disappear!"

With a downward motion, he sheathed the Muramasa. A moment later, the vibration stopped. Skallda let out a long breath.

"Skallda?" Sara peered up at him.

"I won," Skallda said, lifting his head. "The Muramasa is no longer a demonic blade."

At that moment, the Vampire Lord shouted. "The space is starting to

warp. The demons are coming!"

An ominous pressure began to fill the chamber.

"Sara, protect yourself and Rasha. I'll take them down."

Sara nodded without a word. They ran to the center of the chamber where everyone else was. At the same time, six fireballs appeared.

Scene 28. Greater Demon

Six greater demons began to materialize, surrounding the party. Jaba swung his Kasinart sword once.

"This is a good sword," he said.

That single remark was the signal. Skallda, Gadi, Jaba, and the Vampire Lord all dashed out in four directions. In the center, Belial and Alheim, whose lips were twisted in a sneer, began to chant the Silence spell.

The fireballs vanished all at once.

As he ran, Skallda nonchalantly drew his Muramasa sword. The demonic aura that had resided in the blade was completely gone. The blade itself was glowing with a blinding light. It was as if the Muramasa was screaming in delight.

Naclav, being an undead, could not generate ki, and therefore, Skallda and the others couldn't sense his presence. The ki transmitted from Skallda was the first the Muramasa had felt in years, ever since it had been sealed underground with Naclav. As Skallda's ki compressed, the blade shone with an even more intense light.

A few meters ahead, a giant demon loomed.

Shhh

A greater demon, which had just started to stand up and was exhaling steam, saw Skallda rushing toward it. A familiar expression appeared on its face. Upon closer inspection, it had two scars on its torso. Skallda's memory returned.

It's the one from back then.

The scars were marks left by Skallda and Gadi. It was the demon that had single-handedly dealt a devastating blow to Skallda's party and taken Silver's life. The expression on its face was the same mocking sneer they had seen the moment it fled using a Mabarl spell.

"You again."

Its eyeless sockets seemed to say. It was clearly looking down on

Skallda. Intense anger welled up in Skallda's heart.

That will be your last laugh.

From a distance that a regular warrior would have to close by another three steps, Skallda swung down the Muramasa. The light of his ki extended from the tip of the blade. Following the Muramasa's movement, it sliced the greater demon from its head down to the floor at its feet.

The demon's sneer froze.

Its entire body began to tilt to the right. There was a discrepancy in the angle of the tilt between its right and left halves. The right eye appeared a few centimeters higher than the left. This displacement began to accelerate.

Slice.

The greater demon's body was sliced in half along its center line. This was the line where the ki had passed through. Just like the Orc he had slain in his very first battle as a samurai, its body had been cut in two vertically.

With a ground-shaking thud, the two halves of the giant body fell. The demon was dead, its sneer still fixed on its face. He had killed it with a single stroke, an iaido strike. This same monster had even repelled the sword Kasinart.

The terrifying sharpness of the Muramasa—its power to conduct ki—was on full display.

An indescribable sense of satisfaction coursed through Skallda. He had even performed a class change to a samurai for this very moment. However, he had no time to revel in it. He had to defeat as many as he could, as quickly as he could. Skallda leapt towards his next target.

Gadi was thinking about something that happened over a year ago, before he came to the fortress city of Trebor. At that time, Gadi was a level 9 warrior wandering the land. Unlike Werdna's dungeon, the surface world wasn't overflowing with monsters. For a person not yet twenty to be recognized as a level 9 warrior, they had to have extensive combat experience and have faced death numerous times.

Having lost his parents in a war and held a sword since he was a child, Gadi had lived a life unimaginable to an ordinary person. He

had worked as a bodyguard and a mercenary, and other times he'd searched for treasure in Orc caves or repelled hordes of Ogre that attacked villages. Blessed with a robust physique, Gadi had honed his skills as a warrior and continued his journey in search of new adventures.

It happened in a small post town near the northern border, a town where people made a meager living from the money dropped by travelers. At the time, Gadi was traveling with a hobbit rogue of Evil alignment. He hadn't specifically looked for a travel companion, but this selfish rogue had noticed Gadi's skill and had been following him for several days, half using him as a bodyguard.

At the town's only tavern, Gadi was unwinding from a day of travel. The place was shabby, but had a seat for every person, and was surprisingly full. The commotion started in one corner. Someone began a heated argument. One of them was Gadi's companion, the rogue. His opponent was a gnome priest from a group of six sitting at a round table. The argument was becoming quite emotional. The snippets of conversation that had been quiet at first grew louder, eventually echoing throughout the tavern.

The debate centered on which was a superior warrior: a taller human or a stout and sturdy dwarf. The hobbit argued for humans, while the gnome advocated for dwarves. By nature, this was a debate that could never be settled no matter how much they argued. Considering individual differences, it was impossible to say which was superior.

But the two were stubborn. Finally, they brought their companions into the argument. The hobbit's companion was, of course, Gadi.

"I've never seen a stronger warrior than him!" the hobbit yelled, pointing at Gadi. All eyes in the tavern turned to Gadi. "If there's a dwarf out there who can beat him, we'll become their servant!"

Carried away by the moment, the hobbit made this declaration with all the tavern's patrons watching.

"Interesting," the hot-blooded gnome priest said, his eyes glinting maliciously. "If that's true, I'll give you a thousand gold."

A thousand gold was a considerable sum. It was enough to live lavishly for a month with change to spare. The greedy rogue accepted the offer without consulting Gadi.

A large dwarf warrior in his mid-thirties had approached Gadi, who had been sitting with his back to the commotion, pretending not to care. While dwarves are typically only about 1.2 meters tall, this one was 1.5 meters. His build was equally bulky, with muscles like knots rippling under his dark skin.

"Excuse me, but would you step outside?" the dwarf said. "It's for a foolish reason, but I have to save my companion's face."

"You look strong," Gadi said, turning around.

"I'll be a Master warrior of Level 13 soon."

Over his shoulder, Gadi saw the smug face of the gnome and the face of his own hobbit companion, which had gone instantly pale.

The square in front of the tavern, lit by torches, was encircled by cheering, drunken patrons, delighted for some unexpected entertainment, and a few townspeople. In the center of the ring stood Gadi and the dwarf. They each held a hard, wooden sword that had been made on the spot. Their armor consisted of a non-magical iron breastplate, a shield, and a helmet. A traveling weapon merchant who had been eagerly listening to the argument had happily provided them.

The rules were simple: the wooden swords were treated as real ones, and the first to land a fatal blow would win.

"If I lose, do I really become a servant?" Gadi asked the dwarf, or rather, the gnome priest behind him.

"Of course," the gnome said, the corners of his lips curling. "Your companion promised. Everyone in the tavern is a witness. And I've bet a thousand gold."

The dwarf looked very experienced in battle. The talk was that he was a famous warrior in the northern lands. Even Gadi would find it difficult to overcome a 3-level gap. The dwarf's warrior career was undoubtedly superior.

Well, if push comes to shove, I'll make that rogue take responsibility.

Just as he thought that, the gnome's face stiffened as one of his companions whispered something to him.

"Hey, that hobbit ran away! Since he's gone, you'll have to work for both of you!"

This was a outrageous turn of events.

That bastard!

At that moment, the weapon merchant, who had volunteered as the referee, gave the signal.

"Begin!"

Crouching low, the dwarf approached with a low and stable center of gravity. He held his shield above his head, so an attack from above would be ineffective. While Gadi hesitated to attack, the dwarf scurried around him with the speed of a crab. From a position in Gadi's blind spot, a light wooden sword shot out like an arrow. Gadi managed to dodge the strike, but a cold sweat broke out on his back.

Gadi leapt back a considerable distance.

"He's a real pro. Incredible."

A hint of surprise appeared on the dwarf's face as he lowered his shield.

"I intended to finish it with one strike," he said, raising his shield again.

He would surely follow up with a series of continuous attacks. The only way to land a blow on the dwarf's body was to slice upwards from below. However, for Gadi, who was already taller, it would be difficult to aim low at an opponent who was also crouched low. If he lost his balance, the dwarf's sword would surely find its mark.

Then...

He'd have to use a tricky move against a more skilled opponent. It was a long shot.

The dwarf closed the distance. Gadi poured all his strength into the arm holding the wooden sword. And then he jumped.

Gadi's unexpected move slowed the dwarf down. Gadi brought his entire developed body weight to bear as he brought the wooden sword down on the iron shield. The sound of wood hitting iron was followed almost simultaneously by the sound of iron hitting iron. The dwarf staggered. The shield, pushed by the wooden sword, had given his helmet a hard shock.

In the next moment, Gadi, who landed on one knee, struck the dwarf's abdomen with his sword. A cheer erupted. The dwarf didn't move for several seconds. Finally, he spoke.

"--What's your name?"

"Gadi."

"Gadi, huh. That was a good strike. Where are you headed next?"

"I haven't decided."

"I see."

The dwarf broke into a big grin.

"We're heading for the dungeon of the great wizard Werdna. If you feel like it, come there. I'll help you get more real-world experience."

"The one at Trebor's Fortress?"

"That's the one. That powerful sword of yours, if you polish it, it will surely become something incredible. Far better than mine."

Sometime later, Gadi heard rumors that the dwarf--Gogleg's brother--had been defeated by Werdna. At that moment, Gadi decided to go to the dungeon.

Standing before the greater demon, Gadi was reminded of the sensation of striking a rock. Its outer skin was as hard as rock, yet possessed incredible elasticity. He knew that if he just slashed at it, he wouldn't do much damage.

Thinking, Gadi ran.

The demon did not take any defensive stance against Gadi. It stood upright and began to chant a spell. It seemed to have absolute confidence in the armor-like quality of its outer skin. That was what he was aiming for. His own strength, combined with a tricky move to exploit the opponent's weakness. With his current skills, that was his only option.

Skallda had felt the limits of his ability as a warrior and became a samurai. But Gadi wanted to see how strong he could become while remaining a warrior. He wanted to know if he could "become something incredible," as the dwarf had said. If he could defeat this demon, he felt he would have his answer.

He had already discarded his shield. He held the Kasinart sword in a reverse grip with both hands. Right before the greater demon, Gadi accelerated even more. Without losing any momentum, his large body flew through the air. It looked like he was doing a flying kick aimed at the demon's broad lower abdomen.

But as he jumped, Gadi tightly tucked his body. The sword was thrust straight out between his legs. All of Gadi's mass, with its inertia, was concentrated on the single point of the Kasinart's tip.

"*Hmph!*"

The moment he felt the sword tip make contact, Gadi tensed his arm muscles to their limit. The impact traveled up his arms and back to the sword tip. His tucked-in legs landed against the demon's abdomen, colliding with it.

Gaah!

The demon gasped. Its expressionless eyes looked at the small creature clinging to its lower abdomen. The Kasinart sword was buried up to its hilt in the place where a human's navel would be. It had pierced through the thick outer skin and muscle fibers, sticking almost vertically into it.

But that was only for an instant.

Gadi pushed up on the hilt. Using the base of the blade as a pivot point, the blade sliced downward through the greater demon's internal organs. And with a single motion, he pulled it down.

With the sound of something tearing, the greater demon's lower abdomen was ripped open. A large amount of bright blue fluid spilled out.

Guaaah!

The giant demon screamed, clawing at its head with its talons and looking up at the ceiling. The air in the chamber vibrated with the sound. Gadi quickly retreated.

The greater demon fell forward. Blue blood gushed from between its fangs. With a final whoosh, it spread its wings, then stopped moving.

Gadi finally exhaled the breath he had taken at the start of the fight. A smile of immense satisfaction appeared on his face, which

was stained blue with the demon's blood.

I still need more training.

He felt that there was still much further to go as a warrior.

Scene 29. Maelific

The Greater Demon was chanting *Madalto*. But not a single wisp of cold air appeared.

The air around the demon had ceased to transmit all sound. Belial and Alheim's *Montino* was working miraculously.

In front of the Greater Demon, the Vampire Lord gracefully leapt up. A fearsome smile was on his perfectly beautiful face. The demon seemed to swipe its claw at the Vampire Lord as he flew up to chest height—

But the figure wrapped in a dark blue cape was no longer there.

"A demon with its spells sealed is no better than a puppet to me."

The Vampire Lord was now hovering next to the Greater Demon's head, which was nearly touching the ceiling.

"Why aren't you satisfied with the demon world? Leave the desire to expand your territory to the humans."

He whispered, quickly circling to the front of the demon.

"Farewell."

The claws on both of his outstretched hands extended as if emitting a ray of light. At their tips were the Greater Demon's defenseless eyes.

The ten claws plunged soundlessly into the demon's eyes. The Greater Demon's movements came to a halt.

The claws had entered the brain through the eye sockets.

The Vampire Lord nonchalantly pulled out his claws and landed lightly on the floor. A moment later, the demon collapsed backward with a thud.

In the chamber, there were now a total of five dead Greater Demons. Two were severed by Skallda, one was defeated by Gadi, and two had their brains destroyed by the Vampire Lord. The remaining one had its throat gouged out by Jaba and had fled back to the demon world.

The one just killed by the Vampire Lord was the last of them.

They had repelled those six Greater Demons. It was a great victory.

At that moment, it was no wonder that everyone had let their guard down.

The first to notice the abnormality was Rasha.

Behind Jaba, who was by the throne, a huge arm-like shadow was faintly visible. If it was an arm, it was more than twice the size of a Greater Demon's. A simple calculation suggested that its body would be over ten meters tall.

As Rasha watched, the shadow rapidly grew in density. It was indeed arm-like. It looked as if a thin, arm-shaped gas was rising from the floor.

Rasha walked closer to Jaba.

Skallda also noticed the shadow.

"Jaba, what's that shadow behind you?"

"*Huh?*"

Jaba turned around. At that exact moment, the arm was about to attack him.

"Look out!"

Rasha pushed Jaba away. Rasha took his place in the spot where Jaba had been.

The shadowy arm passed right through Rasha's body.

Rasha's body stiffened as if she had been struck by lightning. Her entire body convulsed violently.

"Rasha!"

Jaba caught Rasha as she was about to fall.

There was no answer. Her pupils were fully dilated. Her heart had stopped.

Jaba's expression changed. "Rasha! Hey, Rasha!"

Beyond the throne, a gigantic, shimmering shadow was huddled. The shadow that had passed through Rasha also returned there. There was another arm just like it.

They looked like a person buried alive, with only their face and arms protruding from the ground. It was as if their bodies below the shoulders were hidden within the thick stone floor.

However, the shadow corresponding to the face alone was well over a meter in size.

Occasionally, flames swirled and lightning flashed within the shadow.

Clearly, the interior of that shadow was the demon world. The reason it looked blurry and wavering was that the boundary with this space was warped.

Rasha, having overlapped with the interdimensional space, had all her life energy sucked into the demon world.

The shadow was rapidly beginning to take on a distinct shape. It was a shadow transparent enough to see the wall on the other side. But as its outline sharpened, it became clear what it was.

It was indeed a face.

Its overall impression was similar to a bird with its beak cut off. However, it didn't actually resemble a bird.

There were protuberances of flesh on its crown. Its half-open mouth had no teeth, and its ends extended upwards to just below the pointed ears on the sides of its face.

The center of the face was deeply sunken, and two round eyeballs gleamed within it. Its eyes were expressionless, completely devoid of any emotion.

That mouth opened wide.

"*Kaaaaaa...*"

The exhalation had an inorganic sound, unlike anything a living creature would produce.

As if crawling out of the floor, the head began to rise. From underneath, its neck, shoulders, and developed chest emerged.

That alone made its head reach the ceiling, which was nearly five meters high. Two pairs of raptor-like wings spread out on its back.

The phantom once again exhaled deeply.

"Myrefic..."

A groan-like murmur escaped the Vampire Lord's lips. "To think it had revived this far..."

"Is this a physical body?"

Skallda asked, without taking his eyes off the semi-transparent form of the demon—the Demon God Myrefic—that remained half-submerged in the stone floor.

"No, not a complete physical body, but—"

Before he could finish his sentence, Myrefic had begun chanting a spell at a terrifyingly slow pace.

It was a voice like a rumble from the earth. That voice began to weave a familiar spell.

It was the Tailtweight of Great Explosion. The incantation took more than ten times the normal time, but it was undoubtedly that spell of searing heat.

"Its attacks will be real and will hit us."

As soon as the Vampire Lord finished speaking, Skallda drew Muramasa. The ki blade that had slaughtered two Greater Demons sliced diagonally through Myrefic's head. But Myrefic's slow incantation did not stop.

"Wha—!?"

"Its main body is in the demon world. We can't attack it from here. At this rate—"

The incantation was progressing, slowly but surely. Just as the all-consuming flames were about to rain down on the party—

Suddenly, Myrefic began to writhe in agony.

Yellow-brown blood spurted from the protuberance on its head. The struggling Demon God's form began to lose its shape. It became the same interdimensional shadow as when it appeared.

Within that space, there was a black human silhouette. In one hand, it held a longsword that looked as though it was melting.

That silhouette grinned. Its pure white teeth, some of them missing, were bared.

Flames from the demon world surged within the space. The black silhouette was enveloped in the fire.

The connection to the demon world closed. In an instant, the area returned to being part of the chamber.

"Gogleg..."

Gadi murmured, staring at the silhouette that had already disappeared.

Everyone gathered around Rasha's body. Tears ran down Jaba's cheeks as he held her.

Rasha had died instantly.

Belial knelt down and examined the body, which had begun to turn cold. With a grim expression, Belial looked up.

"She has completely lost her life force. It's the same state as someone who has been energy-drained by an undead monster. Resurrection by normal means will be difficult."

"Is she a goner?"

Jaba asked, his eyes pleading. "If you need it, I'll give you my life! Please, do something—"

"There is one way."

Belial looked at Alheim.

"Do you remember it?"

"A bit. But I haven't seen it in over five years."

"Even so, that's our only option."

"What are you going to do?"

Skallda asked.

"It's a unique resurrection method from the temple where we trained. It involves two people chanting spells at the same time. Since it can activate the body and recall the soul, it's a very useful method for reviving someone in this state. However, if the two people's timing is off by even a single moment, the revival will fail —"

It was a difficult method. One person had to chant Mady, the

Healing spell, while the other had to time their resurrection spell perfectly. It would not succeed unless the two were in perfect sync.

And they were going to attempt this, even though they were former fellow disciples now separated into Good and Evil, Belial and Alheim.

"Are you sure you can do it?"

"At the very least, this is my first time doing it."

Alheim's expression became serious.

Rasha was laid on her back on the floor. Belial stood at her feet, and Alheim stood at her head.

As everyone, including Jaba, held their breath, Belial's incantation of Mady began. A moment later, Alheim began to chant the resurrection spell.

Drops of sweat glistened on both of their faces. They were concentrating intensely.

"Please," Jaba whispered, closing his eyes.

The two spells resonated with each other. They eventually became a low harmony.

The last note ended at the same time.

Werdna's chamber was filled with a warm light emanating from their palms.

Scene 30. Trebor

The impregnable great castle, Castle Trebor, rises majestically in the center of the fortified city. Even today, more than a hundred years since its construction, its scale is said to be the largest among all nations, and it proudly flaunts its imposing presence centered around the King's Tower.

Its defense against foreign enemies was flawless. In addition to a large number of guards stationed around the clock, a powerful barrier was cast over the entire castle by the court's resident mages. Anyone attempting to teleport using magic would have their coordinates thrown wildly off, with the risk of materializing inside the castle walls or moat.

At the very top of the King's Tower, specifically in Trebor's antechamber and bedroom, the force fields released from the four surrounding spires would combine into a complex barrier, obstructing all teleportation. The uniform force fields from the four cardinal directions—east, west, north, and south—completely repelled the energy of a *Malor* spell.

If one were to attempt to teleport into the King's Tower, their materialized body would be displaced by the same distance it was reflected. If they teleported from the ground, they would be cast out into the empty void more than one hundred meters above the King's Tower.

It was a magical shield several times more powerful than the barrier in the deepest level of the dungeon. In theory, materializing inside it was impossible.

But there was one person who had succeeded in invading it: Werdna. And so, Trebor was robbed of his Amulet.

Afterward, a thorough check of the barrier was conducted under the orders of a furious Trebor, but no abnormalities were found anywhere. The invasion route remains a mystery to this day.

Late at night. It was the moment today was about to become yesterday. In the king's antechamber at the top of the King's Tower, which overlooked the fortified city, stood two men.

One had a completely bald head with strange tattoos. This was

Grebnarg, Trebor's military strategist and a mage known as the "Masked Fiend." Grebnarg was kneeling before the other man.

The man was seated deeply in a luxurious leather chair. He was in his mid-forties, with an aquiline nose and a thick beard covering a rugged chin. His eyes shone with a manic, feverish brilliance.

This man was Trebor, the Mad Monarch, the king of the fortified city who had terrorized neighboring nations with his insatiable desire for conquest and the power of his Amulet.

"—Hasn't Naclav returned yet?" Trebor asked.

"No, my lord. But with such a delay, perhaps he'll manage to recover the Amulet tonight," Grebnarg chuckled softly. "He wasn't very quick-witted even when he was alive, but he's got skill. He's a good choice to keep an eye on the Good party members so they don't get swayed by Werdna."

"Indeed. For a moment, he considered casting a *Tiltowait* on that party, but I reprimanded him severely. Even in that state, he seems to have some lingering attachments to this world."

"Well, his soul is still his own," Grebnarg said.

Both men shared a knowing laugh.

"What a fool. To actually believe the story that he can become a living person again once the Amulet is returned."

"Exactly. Even with ancient forbidden arts, that level of resurrection is the limit."

"Something about the 'Puppet Method'?"

"Yes," Grebnarg nodded. "It's a form of necromancy that summons and hosts the person's own soul. Thanks to that, they can act just like a living person, so their true nature as a spirit isn't easily discovered."

"Why are we using the crypt of the Temple of Cant? The priests there are quite bothersome. I want to avoid any trouble."

"This puppet art is inherently dangerous," he said, his red-rimmed eyes fixed on Trebor. "Utilizing the spiritual force field there allows us to perform it safely. The high priest is not one to defy Your Majesty's will. He won't complain anymore."

"Fine. All I care about is recovering that Amulet soon. When I do—" Trebor turned his head, looking out at the dark horizon beyond the open balcony. "The time will finally come for me to seize everything in this land. I shall once again plunge those fools who are lost in temporary peace into the depths of despair."

"As you wish," Grebnarg said, bowing. He then stood up. "Then I will take my leave. I shall go check on things at Cant."

"Very well. I await good news."

Bowing respectfully once more, Grebnarg exited.

Grebnarg had just left the Temple of Cant at dusk—though it looked like night due to black clouds—and was now re-entering it. He proceeded through the temple, where everyone but the gatekeeper seemed to be fast asleep, and descended the hidden staircase leading to the underground dome.

Near the entrance to the dome, Grebnarg sensed someone's presence.

"Who's there? Is that the high priest?"

There was no response. Grebnarg entered the dome regardless.

In the center of the crypt, a black altar stood exactly as it had before. There was nothing out of the ordinary with the Orc's head mounted on it. However, a significant change had appeared in the flames erupting from the mouths of the two skull statues on either side. The fire, which should have been burning blue, had turned a dark, blood-red.

And behind the altar stood a man in a robe with his hood pulled down low over his face. A man who did not look like a priest was standing in this underground room, a place only the highest-ranking monks of Cant were permitted to enter. Grebnarg furrowed his brow—the skin on his forehead where a brow would be.

"You are—"

"A specter," the man said. He seemed to be quite old.

"Nonsense. Why are you here?"

"I came back from the other side to deliver a divine punishment to you," the man said, chuckling. He then nonchalantly pulled back his hood.

Grebnarg's eyes widened. He recognized the white-bearded old man who appeared.

"It's become a habit of mine to surprise people like this. You must be particularly surprised, aren't you? After all, the very person you were supposed to have Lost with your own hands is standing right here."

"—That cowardly priest. You let him live."

"You made an opportunity by Losing me and then sent your henchman with the party. You truly live up to your reputation as a master strategist." The old man grinned. "However, seeing that the flames have turned red, it seems the puppet you were controlling didn't fare so well, did it?"

The old man was referring to the candle flames.

"You fool," Grebnarg said, tensing up. "I'll bury you with my own hands this time!"

"I wouldn't advise that. The spiritual energy is too strong here. If you were to cast a *Tiltowait*, you'd incinerate yourself."

"*Hmmph*," Grebnarg stopped his incantation.

"By the way, do you know what state you're in right now?"

"What?"

"This altar is meant to absorb the backlash that travels to the caster when a puppet is destroyed. The spell you used would otherwise have all the damage suffered by the puppet assault the caster as well. That's why you chose this crypt, with its force field that maximizes efficiency, didn't you?"

"..."

"The backlash will be completely transferred to the Orc's corpse in about a week. I follow the Good creed, but I'm not so soft as to show mercy to you."

The old man began to chant quickly. A high, beautiful rhythm, unlike a voice of an old man, rang out.

"That's—a *Jilwan*!"

The moment Grebnarg screamed, the head of the Orc, which had

been hit by the old man's *Jilwan*, was blown clean off.

The buffer was gone. The shock of the Vampire Lord's *Jilwan* that Naclav had received hours earlier, deep underground, was fed back into Grebnarg's body.

Pssh.

It looked as though flames had erupted from his tattoos.

A moment later, Grebnarg vanished without a sound.

"This is the price for toying with human life..." The old man—Silver—wore an expression that was neither angry nor sad.

After his secret meeting with Grebnarg, Trebor stood up to move into his two-room suite. He rang a bell to summon the guards assigned to the King's Tower and ordered them to tidy up the antechamber. He then headed for the bedroom door.

When he went to open it, Trebor noticed it was slightly ajar.

Someone must have been cleaning. He didn't think much of it and entered the bedroom, locking the sturdy bolt.

This lock ensured that not even his butler could enter the room. Trebor's habit was to completely seal himself in when sleeping, as assassins from other nations could disguise themselves as anyone.

He crossed the bedroom, which was as big as a small hall, and got into bed. He dimmed the light on the lamp beside his pillow.

It was then.

"...Lord Trebor..." A muffled voice reached Trebor's ears.

Trebor shot up.

"Who's there!"

His eyes scanned the room, catching sight of a dark figure standing near the door. It was a man in tattered black robes. He looked like a specter.

"Naclav..." Trebor groaned. "How did you get in here?"

"...Lord Trebor... I am in such pain..." Naclav whispered, not answering the question.

He drew his right arm from his cloak. In his palm was something

emitting a faint purple light.

"Is that—the Amulet!"

The Amulet, which had been taken from this very room by Werdna several years ago, was now before him.

At that moment, all doubt vanished from Trebor's mind. Why Naclav was in this King's Tower, a place no one should be able to enter—none of that mattered anymore.

"Well done, Naclav. Give it to me, now."

Trebor got out of bed and approached the dark figure.

"...I'll be able to return to my original body, right?" Naclav asked in a voice that was barely a whisper.

"Of course. Now, hurry, hurry."

As he spoke, Trebor came within a few steps of Naclav.

"Really?"

"Of course, it's true."

His outstretched hand was about to touch the metal object glowing in the dim light.

Suddenly, the arm holding the Amulet was pulled back.

"Don't you lie, you mad monarch!"

"What—" Trebor was stunned as the Amulet was thrown over his head.

"Oh," Trebor said, turning around in a panic. He saw a man in armor, who had appeared behind him, catching it.

"We heard everything. That's a pretty dirty trick for a king of a nation to pull, isn't it, Your Majesty?"

"You people—" Trebor finally came to his senses. "How did you get in here?"

"With a *Malor* spell. The barrier isn't as perfect as you think."

Another voice came from the side. It was a large man also dressed in armor. It was Skallda and Gadi, and Jaba disguised as Naclav.

"You said you couldn't trust those of the Good creed," Skallda said.

"That you were afraid we'd be convinced by Werdna. But let me tell you, I, at least, don't go back on my word no matter what. Not unless I'm betrayed first."

"—What do you plan to do with me?"

"I'd like to just strike you down, but I can't. If you die, other nations might start a war."

"*Tch*," Jaba muttered with dissatisfaction.

"We'll give you this Amulet."

"What—"

Trebor was surprised by Skallda's unexpected words, and the Amulet was tossed to him. Trebor reached out to catch it. A sharp pain shot through his chest.

Skallda had already unsheathed and resheathed his Muramasa in a single flash—a draw-and-sheathe technique.

Trebor instinctively dropped the Amulet.

"What did you do—"

"Just a little charm. It won't be an issue as long as you govern in peace, but if you start a war and get too excited, the blood vessels near your heart might burst. This wound can't be healed with magic."

"From now on, you'll have to live a quiet life. It's not that difficult." Gadi said, mimicking a gesture of clutching his chest.

"You fiends!" Trebor reached for the Amulet on the floor. With it in hand, he knew the spell to conjure a magical barrier, making him invincible. He planned to slaughter these insolent wretches after that.

Grasping the metal fragment, Trebor shouted. "O, sacred Orihalcon. The time has come to release the power sealed within you. Make the air my shield and repel all evil spirits that defy me—"

The subsequent chant in the ancient language was supposed to envelop Trebor in a barrier that would protect him from any attack.

But nothing happened.

Trebor could only lie face down on the floor.

"*Ugh*," Jaba sighed. "It makes me sick to think I wanted to join this guy's royal guard. It makes me want to cry."

"The Mad King is nothing without the Amulet's power," Skallda said with contempt.

"A fake! You fiends!" Trebor threw the Amulet down.

"No, it's real. Well, part of the real thing. The Amulet was split into one hundred pieces. The magic won't be resurrected unless they're all gathered."

"You should find adventurers to get them back. We're done with it."

Ignoring the dumbfounded Trebor, who was sitting on the floor, the three of them gathered in one spot.

"Just one more time, be quiet."

"Well then, see you later."

With that, Jaba activated the power of the Ring of Movement. The three figures vanished.

Only the mad king, with his robe still disheveled, was left behind.

Epilogue

A sky of brilliant blue stretched out. To the distant horizon, there was not a single cloud. The sun's light was still more of a gentle touch than a strong blaze, and its slight warmth felt pleasant on skin chapped by the cold air.

Skallda and Sara stood on a small hill overlooking the wilderness. Nearby, a horse with a fine coat nibbled at a few blades of grass, its breath a white plume in the air. Skallda's eyes were fixed on the walled city clinging to the middle of the wilderness.

We'll probably come back again someday.

Thinking of the friends he had already parted with, Skallda closed his eyes.

Silver was alive. The priest of the temple of Cant, who had once agreed to a forced failure of the resurrection under Grebnarg's orders, was unable to bear his guilt and had brought him back to life.

From Silver's own lips, the name of the old elf was also revealed. The great sorcerer Hasturghal, said to be living hidden in the northern mountains, was the true identity of the old elf. He, who had once revived ancient magic alongside Werdna as his senior disciple, feared its overwhelming power and had sealed himself away in the deep mountains. However, upon learning Werdna's true intentions, he had set up residence inside the labyrinth, hoping to assist in the training of adventurers in any small way he could.

Silver and Hasturghal, having learned of Grebnarg's scheme, used a magical mirror to track his movements and ultimately destroyed him.

"Although, it seems you lot had already finished the job before we could even get started. All I did was revive an ancient magic and defeat the one who abused it."

Silver, who appeared before the group as they were about to leave the fortress at dawn, said this, clearly enjoying the surprise on Skallda's face.

Myrefic, whose sole weakness—the horn on his head—had been damaged by Gogleg, had returned to a long slumber to recuperate.

According to the Vampire Lord, this meant the immediate threat had passed.

The problem, however, was the Amulet. By Werdna's will, its handling was entrusted to the first party who defeated him.

Now that the archfiend was inactive, there was no longer any concern that the demon race would target the Amulet. While highly intelligent, their way of thinking was vastly different from that of humans. The idea of taking the Amulet for the sake of some future event did not occur to them.

But if they were to take it back to the surface, it would be caught by the magical barrier at the labyrinth's exit—a barrier set up to sense the Amulet to prevent it from falling into the hands of other countries. It would likely be seized by Trebor. If that happened, Trebor's army would begin its invasion, and a new age of war would descend.

That was something they wanted to avoid. Upon reflection, even if they were promoted to the Royal Guard, it was highly likely that newcomers would be sent to the front lines.

Besides, everyone had already lost interest in joining Trebor's Royal Guard. Even Jaba, upon hearing from the Vampire Lord that the Nacrev incident was probably Trebor's doing, had become completely disillusioned.

Still, leaving it underground was not a good option either. It would eventually be taken by other adventurers, and if they handed it over to Trebor, the result would be the same.

So, the solution Skallda and the others came up with was to divide the Amulet and weaken its power.

If they were to present this plan to Trebor, the search using adventurers would continue until all the pieces were collected. This would fulfill Werdna's wish for a generation of people with strong bodies and minds to be born.

If Skallda and the others wished it, the Vampire Lord had the power to modify the Amulet in any way. And so, the Amulet was divided into a hundred pieces, each given an appearance identical to the original. Werdna's consciousness dwelled within each one, but this time, upon being defeated, it would find peace.

This was done with the hope that someday, the soul of this great wizard would finally find rest.

And so, using the power of Werdna sealed within the Amulet, Skallda and the others teleported to Trebor's bedroom. The magical shields of the royal castle's tower, which formed a complex sphere from all sides, were powerless against a Malor transfer from directly above or below. Of course, it was normally impossible to teleport along this line, but Werdna's labyrinth had been extended all the way beneath Trebor's castle for this very purpose. Werdna's throne was set up directly beneath Trebor's bedroom.

As they parted ways, Skallda asked the Vampire Lord why he served Werdna. It was baffling that the king of the undead, who had lived for millennia and possessed an immortal body, would swear loyalty to Werdna, a powerful but still mortal being.

"Werdna-sama granted me the power to die when I so desire," the Vampire Lord answered. "I have been freed from the torment of an endlessly conscious existence. Though, I am not yet ready to die."

"Belial... and Alheim. I'll be in your debt forever for bringing Rasha back," Jaba said from atop his horse. Rasha was sitting in front of him, and he was holding the reins from behind.

"What are you getting all sentimental for? It's not like you."

"I will hold a funeral for Ha-Kim. Be well, Rasha."

"Thank you!" Rasha shouted as Jaba kicked the horse's flank. It began to gallop away with vigor.

"Skallda, Sara, Gadi, see ya! If you're ever in the area, you'd better visit the village!"

The horse carrying the two of them quickly disappeared into the morning light.

"The climate is good this year, and they have the money they earned in the labyrinth over the past two years. They should be able to live comfortably in his village," Belial said, watching the now pea-sized Jaba and the others, then turned to Alheim. "Shall we go as well?"

"So, you're going together after all?" Sara asked Alheim.

"Well, our direction is the same, so there's no helping it. Of course,

I'm not happy about it. Traveling with Belial, I mean."

Alheim made his usual sarcastic remarks. But Sara was just smiling at him.

"What is it? You must have some kind of misunderstanding."

"I did. And I feel like I need to apologize."

"That's what I'm telling you, it's a misunderstanding. I'm..."

"Let's go, Alheim," Belial said, beginning to walk.

"Yes, yes. Well then, you three, until we meet again. Just so you know, I'm not doing this willingly."

"Farewell," Belial said, looking back. "May Kalqi—blessings—be upon you all."

The two walked off side by side.

"Well then, guess I'll be off, too," Gadi said, hoisting his bag onto his shoulder.

"Where to?" Skallda asked simply.

"Wherever the wind takes me, I guess. I'll probably end up training somewhere, fighting monsters."

"Be careful with the Amulet."

"Yeah, leave it to me," Gadi said, touching the piece of the Amulet he had hidden in his pocket. As long as this single piece was not returned, the power of the Amulet would never be restored. "I'll toss it in the middle of the deep sea or into a volcano. So Trebor will never get his hands on it."

Gadi looked up at the sky. A single bird soared peacefully through the high air. He watched the direction it flew for a moment, then began walking in that same direction.

"That's a very you decision."

"Isn't it? Well, you two, take care..."

As if remembering something, Gadi turned back. "Be good to each other."

With a laugh, he stopped Skallda and Sara from saying anything else, and the giant warrior, too, went on his way.

His name was called, and Skallda opened his eyes. Sara was standing right beside him.

"What is it?"

"Oh, nothing in particular..."

Sara's golden hair glittered as it caught the light, fluttering in the wind.

"What will you do now?"

"I haven't thought about it. I can go back to my master's place, or not. It's not like I can stay in the city like Silver."

Her green eyes were fixed on Skallda. "What about you?"

"I'm going back to my home forest. I miss it terribly. And..."

"And?" Sara tilted her head.

"There's something I want to show the forest, and my grandfather who sleeps there. Something very important to me."

Sara's gaze fell to Skallda's waist.

"The Muramasa?"

"No. Something even more precious, something I have to protect."

Skallda and Sara's eyes met.

"I want to take you to the forest. Will you come with me?"

Sara's eyes widened. A few seconds passed before she nodded.

"Take me. I want to see the forest where you grew up, too."

The horse whinnied softly. Skallda leaped onto its back.

"Let's go."

From atop the horse, he extended one hand and pulled Sara up. In that instant, he felt the trajectory of her lips nearing his. To Skallda's surprise, Sara gave an embarrassed laugh right in front of him.

"Ahaha, guess it just doesn't work, does it? When you're aware of it, I get all shy."

"My bad."

Sara settled onto the horse's back.

"Even if you hadn't asked, I was going to follow you anyway. But I'm happy you asked..."

After saying that, Sara lowered her eyes. Her cheeks were faintly flushed.

The horse began to walk west. Skallda's thoughts were already leaping toward the forest. Thinking of the forest and his grandfather, his father's words came to mind. His father's most precious thing had been the same.

My mother, huh?

Skallda looked at Sara, then up at the sky. The deep blue sky stretched high and clear, endlessly.

[End]